

Trying to Shed a Little Light on English

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To use the “go to page ...” facility on an electronic reader, add 4 to the numbers given below.

Contents

Introduction	1
The great delusion	16
Articles	20
Nouns	26
Pronouns	32
Verbs	37
Other word classes	56
Word order	73
Crazy spelling	79
Structure	82
Problems	91
Learning and teaching	111

I don't know the terms of grammar – I literally don't know what subjunctive for instance means. Is it too late to learn? If not is there some easy book that would tell me? Oh can I be bothered? The horror of not having been educated when young.

Nancy Mitford. Letter to Evelyn Waugh.

19 January 1950

Introduction

LET'S START with a FAQ – a “frequently asked question”. Should you say “She is older than me”, or “She is older than I”? We think that nearly all our readers will be people who would look for the answer, if they wanted one, on the Internet. Our own first port of call would be the Oxford on-line dictionary (referred to from now on as *Oxford*) and sure enough, under the headword “than”, it does discuss the question in a usage note. There is some preliminary talk of “traditional grammar” requiring “I”, but the practical answer is that in recorded modern use “me” is far more common, and that this should be followed.

Try another one. Can you say “He gave it her”, “it” being a book or some such thing, as an alternative to “He gave her it”? A patient on-line search of our main authority: *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language (CGEL)*, unearthed some rather obscure comments* that say you *can*, in British English. Evidently, however, this is *not* a FAQ. And it turns out that, while one of us writers (WF) thinks that “He gave it her” sounds all right, the other (MF) does not!

*In notes to sections 10.17 and 18.38

A language problem of a slightly different kind can appear in print at any moment. Just recently the *New York Times* produced the sentence: “Whom will it be?” Very shortly, it was corrected by deleting the “m” in later issues. No need to look this one up on the Internet – everybody (well, *almost* everybody) – knew it was just plain wrong. Or, even more shameful, it was a “hypercorrection”, which is what you get when some ignoramus “corrects” something that is already correct. And it was all about the word “whom” which, of all words, should be one of those most likely to raise a little warning signal in a writer’s mind.

This, supposedly, was from one of the *NYT*’s best columnists, Gail Collins. But, we told ourselves, surely the offending “m” must have been put in by some underling on the paper’s staff. Or perhaps it was just a typo – the “m” key had been pressed accidentally. We imagined a scene of shock and horror in New York, with the editorial staff gathering round, phones ringing, calls to “hold everything”, and talk of retribution on whoever was responsible. (Or shouldn’t it be “on whom-ever”? Good question!).

These are the kind of things that come to mind when we think about “English usage”. They provide the subject matter for a huge number of books, from the authoritative and wide ranging *Burchfield*, as we will refer to it (*Fowler’s Modern English Usage*, edited by R.W.Burchfield), down to the American favourite, “Strunk and White” (W.Strunk & E.B.White, *The*

Elements of Style, recently attacked as being responsible for “fifty years of stupid grammar”.

We certainly don’t want to add to that heap. Rather, we would like to make a small contribution to a different way of looking at English, something more like an old-fashioned school grammar book, but updated. In the first half of the twentieth century many schools in countries where British English is spoken used a famous one: J.C.Nesfield. *Manual of English Grammar and Composition*. A version of it is still in print in India. Grammar books are still being written, but as far as we know, none has replaced *Nesfield* as a widely used school text.

“Grammar” is really just about *describing a language*. Surely this ought to be an interesting thing to do, just to see what a great language looks like, when it is closely examined. In a way, helping us to decide between correct and incorrect usage is only a bonus.

Over the last century a series of scholarly works has appeared on English, culminating in the great *Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language**, by R.Quirk, S.Greenbaum, G.Leech & J. Svartvik, to which we will make frequent reference (as the *CGEL*). It is about as far from being a “popular” book as you could imagine. It has given rise to other books whose intention, it must be supposed, is to make the subject

*The title, surprisingly, is inaccurate. Although it is a weighty tome, the work has very little to say about anything other than current British and American English, mostly at the formal level.

more accessible, but all of them are aimed at fairly advanced students, rather than new learners or the general reading public. This is the gap we are trying to fill, or at least to make a move in that direction.

Behind all the high-level activity there has been a revolution. We will be beginning this little book with a chapter headed *The Great Delusion*, which is an attempt to clarify the change in attitudes that has resulted, often summed up as the move from *prescriptive* to *descriptive* grammar. As we will try to show, that is a rather misleading way of putting it. The real difference is not so much that we have repudiated prescriptions, as that we have radically altered our sources of authority for them.

In the eighteenth century the idea rose up that Latin provided a model, from which a sort of ideal grammar could be derived, into which English could be fitted. Now we think that we must derive real English grammar – whose primary function is indeed description – from *actual usage*, and moreover we now have a practicable method for doing so, by using the “corpora” of millions of words and phrases that have been recorded and analysed by computers. The different outcomes can be seen in such a simple example as “It is I”, based on the Latin rules, compared with “It is me”. Every undeluded citizen must agree, *we* think, that “me” is the natural English, whether formal or informal, and this view is backed by the corpora.

It is obvious that spoken English has a great many varieties, and that if we look at printed works, the variation in those is only slightly less, so the big question arises: which variety are we to take as “correct”. However, there is an easy answer. In reality, there is a “standard international English”. It is used for speeches, for all serious non-fictional English in print, and for most of the fiction as well. So we know well enough where to look for our specimens.

As everybody is aware, there are two globally recognized varieties, “British” and “American” but, for example, readers of the *Times* have no real difficulty in understanding the *New York Times*, and vice versa. It is true that for the spoken language there is less general agreement on the details of pronunciation, but nevertheless the English of any reasonably well educated speaker is intelligible to all potential listeners, as is demonstrated daily on international radio and TV.

This is a truly remarkable state of affairs. With some unimportant reservations, we can now say that we have a *lingua franca* for the whole world. And yet, it doesn’t seem entirely desirable to everybody. There are some who think that those who use international English see themselves as superior, and regard those who can only speak some other language – or worse still, a dialect such as Afro-American – as inferiors.

Steven Pinker, for example is greatly admired for his explanations of how children are “wired for language”. However, in his semi-popular book, *The Language*

Instinct, he also goes to great lengths to show that the despised dialects are fully efficient languages. To us, as it happens, this is something that doesn't need proving. One of us has had a close acquaintance with Swahili, and the other with Indonesian, and we are well aware that they compare well with English – each of the three languages has its weaknesses and its strong points, but it would be foolish to claim that any of them was generally better or worse than the others. It is easy for us to extend this finding to languages and dialects of almost any kind.

We think that Pinker is missing the point, which is actually staring him in the face as he writes. To get his book published, he had to write it in international English, and he (or his editors) had to do so *correctly*. But then, he wants to distinguish himself, as a proper linguist, who has studied languages at university level, from the mostly self-taught and self-appointed language “mavens” (Yiddish for “expert”). That includes, specifically, even the best of them, such as the greatly admired American, the late William Safire.

Pinker claims that linguists can show how notorious “errors”, like “to my wife and I”, denounced by the mavens (and for that matter, by professional editors, lexicographers, teachers, and the interested general public!) can be explained by the logical analysis of language, and should be perfectly acceptable.

Once again, he seems to be missing the point. International English users are now agreed that correctness

should be defined by actual usage, derived from the corpora, and not by any particular body of academics, or anybody else, however “logical” their arguments may be.

All of which is not to say that the mavens don’t make mistakes, as the linguists do too – or at any rate they frequently disagree with each other. The moral can only be that one should be cautious in pronouncing that other people’s usages are errors.

English usage is a most unusual “discipline”, quite unlike any other field of study. It depends on a circular process. The rules are derived from what people say and write, but changes are always going on, and when enough people break them, the rules must be changed. It may seem strange to students of other subjects, but that’s how it is. And it does mean that arguments are always going on, often fierce ones over quite trivial points. Provided you don’t take them too seriously, most of them don’t really matter very much.

But questioning goes further. Does everybody really need to study grammar in a formal, organized way? A case can be made for saying that for most people, formal teaching is not *necessary*. We can speak to each other more or less intelligibly without having been explicitly taught anything about it. Even Walter Scott, the pre-eminent English writer of the nineteenth century, claimed to have a very poor knowledge of the subject.

Whatever may be true for geniuses, however, we have thought a lot about it, and have concluded that the abandonment of English grammar as a school subject for native speakers has been a great mistake, and has handicapped many otherwise well educated and competent people.

Many others have argued that not only is teaching unnecessary, but that there is no real need for “good grammar” at all. They point to the analogy of subjects such as algebra, which few people use after leaving school. It is a rather poor analogy; we are not “wired for algebra” and it must be taught for the benefit of the important minority who seek a general education, including mathematics.

Anyway they ask: "Just what good will an understanding of grammar do me – especially in this digitalized, global age of ephemeral contacts, where utilitarian communication is increasingly deemed sufficient?". We would argue, however, that on the contrary, the new situation only increases the need to be able to communicate clearly and accurately, especially in written English. Global corporations are like hawks, always swooping down on what they deem to be budgetary excesses. What if they could be made to see grammar as an inexpensive way of improving international communications, that could lead to doing business in ways that were simultaneously more efficient and pleasanter?

English has long been readily acknowledged as the world's lingua franca, yet we find that those same monolithic corporations only make the most fleeting efforts, for example, to encourage a single standard throughout their world-wide branches. Instead, because of the lack of interest at higher levels, employees who participate in company-sponsored business English courses are more likely to be bogged down studying outmoded forms of business document – as though beginning and ending a letter with 'Dear Sir,' and 'Yours sincerely,' made the content any easier to understand. If the company needs some number of widgets to be delivered by their supplier as quickly as possible, it just might make the right kind arrive faster, and in the desired number, if their employees were better able to navigate count nouns, verb tenses, prepositions, adjectives, adverbs, etc.

While there will be a difference in tone between quick-fire emails that you send to your supplier about widgets, and quicker-fire emails that you send to your loved one about what to buy for dinner tonight, a little grammar may lead the way to the avoidance of domestic discord. This internet joke may be apocryphal, but it does serve to illustrate a point. The message sent is:

Honey,

Please go to the shop and buy some bread, and if they have eggs, buy half a dozen.

When the wretched husband comes home with six loaves of bread, he is berated for his inability to speak proper English. But was it entirely his fault? We think, unfortunately, that if the husband's understanding of his wife's mother tongue was derived mainly from schoolbooks, it is quite a possible scenario.

The Guardian recently reported that in the United Kingdom, phone calls, long the medium of choice for casual exchanges, have now been surpassed in popularity by text messages. Of course this is being greeted by the usual choruses of dismay concerning the dying art of conversation. However, we tend to take a different stance, especially as we share a dislike for the telephone as a useful means of communication, as well as an only slightly less pronounced distaste for the highly questionable art of "small talk". This is not to say that we do not believe conversations and discussions in person do not contribute to our general happiness as human beings. It is rather that modern gadgetry has shown us that it is often better able to express many of our secondary exchanges as utilitarian emails and text messages, freeing up time for the pursuit of more meaningful activities, which we can then discuss at greater length with those in our inner circles with whom we have vital, established rapport. Given that the New Media is heavily weighted toward the printed word, it follows that it should also be weighted toward good written English, rather than spoken. That is, it more obviously demands good grammar.

For those who are acquainted with some modern ideas on languages, it may be reassuring that this is essentially a *traditional* grammar book. It does not make use of Noam Chomsky's influential but difficult and still to some extent controversial ideas. We think that traditional grammar, as its concepts have evolved over the last two millennia in various languages, will be more immediately helpful to the readers we have in mind. This should not be misunderstood; we have the highest regard for Chomsky's ideas, it is just that they seem too difficult to apply to a book like this. They are in any case deep explanations of how language works, rather than simply giving a picture of what one of them looks like – or for that matter, providing direct pointers to correct or incorrect usage.

We do see the subject as having changed, partly as an outcome of Chomsky's work, in one way that in principle should affect the ordinary student. We have already mentioned the scholarly studies of the minutiae of English usage, that have culminated, so far, in the *CGEL*. We think that the key feature of this development has simply been the importance now given to *phrases* as the basic units of sentences. We will discuss this point when we come to it, in the chapter headed "Structure", but what it leads to is the perhaps rather surprising conclusion, that in a short book we cannot usefully *summarize* the experts' findings on phrases. The devil is in the details. So we must confine ourselves, in effect, to the older grammar of *words*,

clauses and *sentences*, with only a brief reference to *phrases*. This seems to work well enough for most purposes.

A little book like this must set itself practicable limits. Not only is it obviously impossible for it to cover the finer points of phrase formation, but also – like the *CGEL*, in fact – it will not have much to say about the early history of our language, or about usages that are now to be found only in the older literature. It will say little or nothing about regional “Englishes”, dialects or slang, or about special kinds of language – special mainly in their vocabulary – such as those used in various branches of science and technology, law, medicine, music, art, philosophy, etc.

It is primarily about the written language. The formal spoken language is much the same – although we think we can detect a few rather curious differences in their vocabularies – for example the word “thus” is quite common in the written language, but you hardly ever hear anyone say it!

It is not meant to be used as a reference book, although, at least if you accept it as an e-book, as intended, you can easily search it to find out what it has to say on any of its topics. You will not find the answers to all the questions that arise in your own efforts to get things right. If you are writing for work, you may have to follow the guidance of some house-style instructions that you have been given. In the USA it is common to refer to a published book, *The*

Chicago Manual of Style, which can also be very useful for writers in other countries.

For the exact meaning of words, and for spelling, you can either use your own preferred printed dictionary, or an on-line source (as well as using a spelling checker) on your computer – *oxforddictionaries.com* (which we will refer to from now on as *Oxford*) takes you to an excellent one. Similar electronic aids are usually all you need for translating foreign words, assuming that you already know something of the language in question. You should be consistent in using either British or American preferences. This book follows the Oxford ones. Even if you are working with a computer, you may like to keep the paperback *Oxford Spelling Dictionary* close to hand, as a convenient way of checking spelling, capitalization, and where hyphens are best inserted at line breaks.

You may need some special dictionaries, such as the *Larousse Dictionary of Science and Technology* or, for example, *The Plant Book* of D.J.Mabberley. Some place names are given in general dictionaries – for the more obscure ones we use the index to *The Times Atlas of the World*, but there are many other listings. Similarly, for the names of well known people, and other proper nouns, *Oxford* has taken to including a selection, but there are also many specialized sources.

Both printed and audio sources can also help with pronunciation. Then many dictionaries include short usage notes for some words, generally those that are

commonly misspelt (such as *homogeneous*, or *millennia*) or whose acceptable usage is either disputed or is undergoing some notable change at the present time (*fortuitous*, *fulsome*, *unique*).

For further assistance on usage, we would suggest that you go to *Burchfield* – or, as a simpler alternative, *The Oxford Guide to English Usage*, compiled by E.S.C.Weiner & A.Delahunty, or M.H.Manser’s *Good Word Guide*.

Then, if you become seriously interested, you must go to the *CGEL*, which is available on line, and searchable if you download it. One of its authors, S.Greenbaum, has also produced the *Oxford English Grammar*, but we much prefer the major, multi-author work. For further general reading we recommend *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, by D.Crystal. It is presented in “coffee table” style, but is nevertheless a mine of useful and interesting information. *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*, edited by T.McArthur, also has much of interest.

To anyone more accustomed to “hard” science it is striking that these authorities frequently disagree among themselves, and that their conclusions often seem to be merely opinions, open to question even by the ordinary reader. For instance, the *CGEL* remarks that a pronoun tends to be a surrogate for a whole noun phrase, rather than a noun. But is there really any difference between saying (a) that a “he” and a “her”

stand for “a well dressed old man” and “a young lady with a glass in her hand” or (b) that they just refer to “man” and “lady”? The reader might even ask if this hair splitting, so typical of grammatical discussions, does anyone any good! Which is not, of course, to deny that the *CGEL* is a most remarkable source for the study of the rules of English grammar, with an abundance of specimens of when they are usually followed, and of when deviations may occur.

The great delusion

FROM THE mid-eighteenth century until the twentieth, intelligent popular discussion of English grammar suffered from an extraordinary irrational delusion, which still affects some people, now in their declining years. A few literary men got it into their heads that prepositions (such as “to”, “with”, etc.) could not be placed at the end of sentences, because *in Latin* a preposition always precedes its noun, and so could never end a sentence.

Common expressions like “It’s me” were also breaching the rules of correct grammar. You should say “It’s I”. Why? Because *in Latin* the complement of the verb “to be” (*esse*) is in the nominative (subjective) case. But in reality English prefers its objective case here (in the pronouns, that is, when it has one to use). So you are in fact quite right to say “It’s me”. Latin was being treated as the model language for others to follow. It was *Latin* grammar that was taught in the “grammar schools”, and English grammar hadn’t yet been studied in any great depth.

The English grammar books that began to come out at this time accepted the idea, which seems so wrong-headed to us now. The Latin-based rules were adopted

in educational circles, and educated people began the long-running pastime of protesting whenever journalists or other writers broke them. One notorious complaint was about the “split infinitive”. The rule first defined the term *infinitive*, as meaning the word “to” plus a verb (as in “to love”) and then said you mustn’t put any other words between them (as in “to greatly love”) because *in Latin* the infinitive was one word, and couldn’t be split! It is now seen that the infinitive is just “love”, and that “to” is a separate (and separable) word, which is given a word class all to itself, as the *infinitive marker*.

The whole idea was sometimes taken to even more absurd lengths in the classroom where, for example, children were made to assign a “case” to each noun or pronoun, using the Latin system of six cases. They had to decide if it was in the nominative (in English, “subjective”), vocative, accusative (objective), genitive (possessive*), dative, or ablative case, according to its *function*. The *form* of the nouns does not change, except in the genitive, which is marked by the “apostrophe s”, as in “the boy’s book”. In fact, English nouns have only these two cases, performing all the functions of the six Latin ones, and no useful purpose was served by fantastically pretending otherwise. Then it is best to refer to the one that replaces the Latin nominative, not as the “subjective” but as the

*“Genitive” is also used in English and has the advantage of better describing usages other than literal possession, as in “Shakespeare’s works”, or “the boy’s choice”.

“common” case. As well as there being the two *cases*, of course, the plural *number* is usually marked in the common case by an *s*, or in the genitive by an *s’*.

There is a complication in that the pronouns, *I*, *you*, *he*, *she*, *it*, *we*, *they* and *who* do have a third case, the objective. We need to know how this system functions in English (not Latin!). Most conspicuously, we often need to know when the right word is *I*, or *me*. We’ll be coming back to all that later.

There were a few ineffectual protests about the imposition of Latin rules on English grammar, and a major rebellion set in around the end of the nineteenth century, in particular with denunciations, by authoritative writers, of the prohibition on split infinitives. Nevertheless many people, including schoolteachers, clung even to this particularly nonsensical rule, all through the twentieth century and beyond. Split infinitives no longer attract attention in America, but the idea that they are wrong lingers here and there in Britain. On the other hand, Americans still seem more attached than the British to the “It’s I” fallacy.

And in fact there are some other complications about the use of “I” and “me” respectively, where the rules really are more difficult or debatable. We’ll come back to these later, under “Problems”.

The rule about prepositions at the end of sentences had become a something of a joke (“A preposition is a bad thing to end a sentence *with*.”). It became the

subject of an annotation by Winston Churchill, who memorably marked a draft submitted to him: “This is the sort of English up with which I will not put.” Rather oddly, the name “preposition” has been retained, although it means that the word comes before its noun.

We are left with the question: where *do* the rules come from? The broad answer is, from actual use – as described by the *CGEL* and other scholarly works. Then the narrower questions arise. Who says that the *CGEL*, or any other such work, is *the* authority? Whose usages did they study? In what contexts? One possibly interesting thought is that grammar is not like any other discipline. It is neither wholly an art, subject to opinions, nor a science, based entirely on objective evidence, but works in a way of its own. The rules it produces are not laws of nature. They are subject to change, as usage itself changes. And you certainly get different versions from different “authorities”.

There is an important new development that helps: reality is now studied in enormous “corpora” (the plural of “corpus”) of recorded actual usages, assembled by computers. Given a little flexibility at its margins, and an openness to ongoing change, the system should succeed in maintaining a reasonably stable and universally intelligible language. What we have settled for is called “descriptive” grammar, as opposed to the old deluded prescriptivism, but it is really *prescription based on description*. It works, and it’s all we’ve got.

The Articles

FOR READERS who are interested in languages as such, it may be worth pointing to some of the ways in which English is a rather unusual one, and how it compares with some of the others. This may help to explain some aspects of its grammar.

On what may seem to be a trivial point, it is distinguished as one of the languages that use *articles* – the *definite article* “the” and the *indefinite article* “a” or “an”*. According to the now usual classification, they belong to the small word class known as *determiners*, about which we will have a little more to say later – they are always attached to *nouns* or *pronouns*, and they tell you something about the words to which they are attached.

*Modern grammar recognizes also the “zero” article. Native speakers must be well aware that nouns frequently have no article (or other determiner) but find this no problem. Adult learners occasionally introduce one where it is not wanted, or not allowed.

The only variation the English articles undergo is between “a”, before a word that starts with a consonant, and “an”, when the word starts with a vowel (as in “a pear”, “an apple”). There are various exceptions, mostly to do with words starting with an *h*, or where it is the sound that decides, rather than the spelling (e.g., “a European”). For full details, see the reference books. It is notable that the rules have changed with time – two hundred years ago Jane Austen wrote “an hill”, which is now strikingly archaic. “An herb” has persisted more in American than in British usage. “An hotel”, however, is still fairly common in both.

To give the reader some idea of how we ourselves perceive language study, we will look into this particular matter of the articles in some depth. Native speakers accept these little words as natural, and scarcely give them a second thought, except perhaps when they turn up in odd places like the names of countries. One reason for giving them such prominence here, however, is that advanced learners of English as a foreign language see them as a major difficulty – often the last great hurdle that they encounter in trying to get things just right. Those who have only learned rudimentary English frequently solve their problem by dropping the articles altogether, as in “Give me apple, please”. In trying to figure out how the articles work, grammarians are obliged to devote many pages to them. This example of real practical grammar, based on the simplest of words, poses in fact some of the most

complicated questions. Fortunately, inquiries into other problems usually yield easier answers.

People whose habitual language is anything other than English will be accustomed either to having no articles at all, or else to having them, but using them differently. In any song about love in French, there will be many mentions of *l'amour*. The *l'* (standing for *le*) translates as *the*, but if you were putting the song into English you wouldn't have "the" in front of "love". Are there reasons for this difference? Probably, but they must be fairly obscure. A grammarian doesn't look for *reasons*, but only for *rules*. Analyses of how languages work must lead to some rules about when you use an article and when you don't, as well as whether it should be the definite or the indefinite one. Evidently there are different rules for different languages, and the ones we want are the English ones.

If you look up the *CGEL* you find many pages devoted to this and related questions. For "love", as it happens, there are relatively straightforward answers. It clearly belongs to the group of "abstract non-count nouns". "Love" itself is not mentioned, but it must be in the same group as "anger", "happiness", or "honesty". As regards the definite article, the rule is that these nouns "usually have no article when used generically". One example given is "my favourite subject is history" (not "... is the history"). It is assumed that you know (or can find out) the meaning of "abstract" and "generically" in this context, while "non-count" obviously just

means you don't normally talk about having two or three angers, etc.

There is an exception: when the noun has a phrase after it, especially one beginning with "of", you *can* put in the definite article, as in "*the* love of one's native land". Indefinite articles, also, are not usually wanted with this group of nouns. An exception might be "he had *a* great love for his country".

As an alternative to the *CGEL*, another easily available source of information on a matter such as this is *Burchfield's* dictionary-style book. It has three relevant entries. There is one under the heading *definite article*, one under *the*, and one under *a*, *an*. The heading *indefinite article* just refers the reader to *a*, *an*. The explanations given are shorter than those in the *CGEL*, but almost as difficult to work through, and in the end may not answer your particular question. As regards "love", *Burchfield's* answer is slightly less clear-cut than that of the *CGEL*.

The French rules are simpler. In the first place, it is *normal* for a noun to have its definite article, and the rules are mainly about the exceptions, when they have the indefinite one, or none. An obvious example here is when there is another determiner, as in *mon amour*, (my love). But anyway there seems to be a very simple rule which covers a word like *amour*: it is "a thing which is known from common experience", and such words are among the majority that usually do take the definite article.

Naturally, languages that have no articles need no such rules. There are plenty of them, including Latin, Chinese, Indonesian, Japanese, Russian, and Swahili among the most important. Just how they get along without articles is another question, but we are not concerned with it here.

The truth is that, inquiring into this seemingly trivial subject, we have jumped in at the deep end. The rules about it are exceedingly complicated. The wonder is that they cause very little difficulty to native speakers*, and it is not surprising that non-native speakers find them so troublesome. Practical English teaching does not attempt to make learners memorize the whole set of rules, but rather it exposes students to many examples of actual usage, and hopes that they will learn in the same sort of way as native speakers do as children. Be warned, if you do have to consult a reference book of any kind about the proper use of the articles, it will not be easy. The example used here, of “love”, is one of the simpler ones. The lessons to be learned from this encounter with real grammar are:

- Firstly, that it is often very complicated. People who say it can be simply explained just don’t know what they are talking about.
- Second, native speakers can usually negotiate the difficulties without apparent effort, at least with

*Part of the answer must lie in the explanations due to Chomsky and expounded by Pinker, but it is still not easy to understand how each language has arrived at its own distinctive solution.

regard to the articles. They may realize, however, that there are some curious questions in there, and wonder what the answers could be.

- Third, non-native speakers find it very difficult to master the language by learning the rules – or at any rate they do in this instance. Their best hope is to learn by listening to, or reading, as much native English as possible.
- Fourth, in deciding what is “right”, if needs must, all we can do is find out what the applicable rules are, wherever they come from. They are not based on any simple logic, and they are not facts of nature.

Nouns

WHILE THE articles are a problem for non-native speakers, there is another feature of the language, its relatively slight use of *inflection*, which works the other way, and makes the study of some other languages seem difficult to English speakers. For instance, our articles don't change their form, with the slight exception of *a* to *an*, which is only for ease of pronunciation, and has no other significance. In other languages even the articles (if there are any), as well as words of other classes, may each take numerous forms. The system of *inflection*, as it is called, may be the most striking feature of their grammar.

This difference gives rise to the common misapprehension among its native speakers that “English has hardly any grammar”. In fact, of course, *grammar* is not a synonym for *inflection*. The 2.4 kg weight of the *CGEL* attests that English is not lacking in grammatical rules, and a language without them is inconceivable.

This and the following two chapters discuss three other classes of English word – *nouns*, *pronouns*, and *verbs* – concentrating on how they do change even if, for the most part, it is not by very much. As to the ways in which the words are used and put together, that will mostly be left for later chapters.

As we have already noted, English nouns change to indicate singular or plural *number*, and also have *cases*, the *common* one and the *genitive*. In addition, a few nouns show *gender* differences.

Regular plurals are made by adding an *s*, as in *boy/boys*. There are some spelling changes, as in *lens/lenses*, *lady/ladies*, *loaf/loaves* (but note the regular *hoof/hoofs* and *roof/roofs*) and there are many even more *irregular* plurals. They can be found in the dictionaries, and are dealt with at length in the usual reference books. They include some very common words like *foot/feet*, *man/men*, *woman/women*, *child/children*, *goose/geese*, and *mouse/mice*. Some other words have a plural the same as the singular, like *deer/deer*, *sheep/sheep*, *species/species* and, in most uses, *fish/fish*. A few words only exist as plurals, and are commonly referred to as “a pair of ...”, as in *pants*, *scissors*, *shears*, *tongs*, *trews* and *trousers*. Some words, like *cattle* and *police*, are singular in form but grammatically plural.

The plural of words recently taken from other languages, particularly Latin, is often variable, unstable, or debatable. Sometimes there are two forms, attached to different uses of the word, as in *formula*, which gives either *formulas* or *formulae*, or sometimes it is just a question of individual choice, or of changing fashion (towards the native English form) as in *millennium*, which has either *millennia* or *millenniums* – consult an up-to-date dictionary! In a few cases, such

as *corpus/corpora*, *genus/genera*, *nucleus/nuclei*, and *stratum/strata*, the Latin form is always expected.

There are some words from Latin that until recent times were plurals, but which are now commonly used as if they were singular – *data* and *media* are the best known examples. Quite often, however, they are still used as the plurals of *datum* and *medium*. This can be confusing if the two usages occur in close proximity. The English plurals *medias* and *datas* do not exist. Another word of this kind, however, is *agenda*, originally the plural of *agendum*, which does have the plural *agendas*.

Many words are classed as *mass nouns* or *non-count nouns*, which may mean they have no plural. *Oxford's* examples are “china” and “happiness”. Many others, however, like “whisky” are non-count in some usages, while the plurals (“whiskies”, etc.) are also common. Some words that most often occur in the singular occasionally occur as plurals, with an *s*, for example the names of letters, like “zeds”. And we can quote “If *ifs* and *ans* were pots and pans” – or the American version, “If *ifs* and *buts* were candy* and nuts”.

There will be more to say about plurals in our chapter on Problems, when we confront some difficulties about when a noun in its singular form (such as *majority*) may be *grammatically* plural.

*Rather strangely, the Internet records an ill-informed debate (in Italian!) as to whether the word should be “candy” or “candies”.

The formation of the *genitive case* in the singular is almost entirely regular; it nearly always means just adding an 's to the common case, as in *the boy's book*. In modern English this applies even when the last letter of the singular is also an s, as in surnames like *Burns*, or *Jones*, that become *Burns's* or *Jones's*. There are a few traditional exceptions, particularly *Jesus'*. The *genitive plural* is normally formed by adding an apostrophe after the s of the common plural, as in *boys'*, but when the plural doesn't end in an s, we add one (*after* the apostrophe) as with *men's* and *mice's*.

As well as case and number, some nouns indicate *gender*. English uses gender (masculine, feminine or neuter) primarily to indicate the sex of humans and other mammals, and birds, or the absence of sex in inanimate objects. The lower animals and all plants are named by the language as if they had no sex; they have to be distinguished by the adjectives *male* and *female*, or occasional variants like *cock lobster*. Various inanimate things are sometimes rather fancifully treated as feminine, and in the case of *countries* and *ships* this is a respected tradition.

Some other languages use what they call gender to separate their nouns into groups that are not closely or completely based on sex. Everybody knows that French tables are feminine and that German maidens are neuter. It is sometimes said that English has no "grammatical" gender but only recognizes the "natural" one. But there is at least a grammatical gender

relationship between nouns and pronouns – a woman, Mrs Smith, or a hen, is always *she*.

Examples of *inflected* forms are *actor/actress*, *duke/duchess*, *lion/lioness*, and some loan words like *masseur/masseuse*. Many other pairs are not formed by inflection, but by different words, for example *man/woman*, *boy/girl*, *lad/lass*, *husband/wife*, *lord/lady*, and many of the non-human ones, such as *cock/hen*, *dog/bitch*, *duck/drake*, *fox/vixen*, *goose/gander*, *ram/ewe*, *stallion/mare*. The names of many of even the higher animals do not indicate gender, and again the adjectives *male* and *female* have to be used, or some other ones, as in *bull* or *cow elephant*.

Where there is a common term for both sexes, it can be the male, as in *dog*, or the female, as in *duck*. The inclusive word for *Homo sapiens* is *man*, or *mankind* – at least this was so in the twentieth century, although earlier these words did sometimes refer specifically to males. Feminists, however, would prefer *human*, or *humankind*. They also object to words like *chairman* (and in this case have largely succeeded in replacing it by *chair*).

Some words like *horses*, *hens*, or *cows*, are used loosely to include both sexes, while in animal husbandry or in legal contexts they have more precise meanings. The other common-gender word for those ordinary farm animals, bulls and cows, is *cattle*, but it has additional technical and legal uses. To cope with this gap in the ordinary English vocabulary, writers

sometimes use *bovine(s)* but that can sometimes be inaccurate as well, since it includes other species of *Bos*.

Nouns are often used *attributively*, as if they were adjectives, as in *tea party*, *war games*, and many more. They are sometimes hyphenated, as in *house-agent*. Or the words may be combined, as in *housewife*.

Proper nouns are a special class. They are spelt with a capital – as in the names of places and people. When in doubt (as perhaps you may be for Civil Service, Jesuitical, Lent, queen, or Tabasco sauce, for example) you can look up the *Oxford Spelling Dictionary**, or some other dependable source. We will refer to them again in our chapter on Structure.

Other uses of capitals are mostly questions of typography and we will not go deeply into that large and important subject. Our own general rule is to use lower case letters in most places where there is a choice. One small exception in this book is that, following a fairly widespread practice, and only for the sake of appearances, we have put the opening words of each chapter in “small caps”. As can be seen, we have not used capitals for emphasis, and we have not used underlining at all. For further details on these and other typographical questions, the best source is the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

We will deal with *Verbal nouns* in our chapter on Verbs.

*However, it includes “queen” but not “king”, and omits to say that they are capitalized in titles.

Pronouns

OUR TREATMENT of pronouns will be nearer to the older traditions than to the *CGEL*, in two ways. First, we cling to the idea that pronouns always replace nouns; we have already touched on this in our remark on p.14, that in the example given, the pronouns can be thought to replace the antecedent nouns, and not the the noun phrases, as the *CGEL* would have it – but in any case, replacing a noun phrase would be pretty much the same as replacing a noun, would it not? Secondly, we have not given so much emphasis to the connection between pronouns and determiners, but only noted that many words can be either*.

The words we are concerned with first in this chapter are *I, he, she, it, we, you, they*, and *who*. These are the pronouns that are inflected (or use a different word, like *me*) to show their *case* forms, and which all have an *objective* case. Each of them has a *reflexive*

*The *Oxford English Grammar* goes a step further even than the *CGEL*, in suggesting that pronouns and determiners could form a combined word class.

variant, but *whoself* is given as “rare, obsolete” in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, so we have omitted it.

In addition, the *personal* ones (that is, all except *who*) show *number*: singular and plural, and also *person*: first, second and third, which are respectively the person speaking, the person spoken to, and the person spoken about. The “persons” can be something other than human beings, and very often are, especially the third one. In the *third person singular* they also show *gender*, as *he*, *she* and *it*.

All this is set out in the accompanying table. It will be seen that the *second person singular* is missing, except for its reflexive form. The older form, *thou*, has been replaced by *you*, which is treated grammatically as a plural, whether it refers to one or many people. This began essentially as a matter of courtesy. The “person addressed” gets special polite treatment in many languages.

The table could have shown a little more. *Whoever* and *whosoever* change like *who*, to give *whomever*, *whosever*, *whomsoever* and *whosesoever*.

A few pronouns or pronoun phrases that are not included can have regular plurals, like *ones* and *others*, while *this* and *that* have the plurals *these* and *those*, and the following can all have the genitive ending, *'s*, as in *one's*, *anyone's*, *everyone's*, *someone's*, *either's*, *neither's*, *other's*, *another's*, *anything's*, *everything's*, *nothing's*, *something's*, *anybody's*, *everybody's*, *nobody's*, and *somebody's*.

To give a fairly complete list of pronouns we should add those that make none of the above inflections: *any, both, each, enough, few, fewer, fewest, half, least, less, lesser, many, more, most, much, none, little, several, what, whatever, which, and whichever*.

The word *one* is, of course, a numeral as well as a pronoun, and many of the pronouns that are not in the table can also serve as determiners. As already noted, this latter point is given prominence – and discussed in great detail – in the *CGEL*.

The *objective* case has been lost in English nouns, but it has survived in the pronouns of the table, even though *you* and *it* have the same form in the *objective*

Pronoun inflections

<i>Person, number, gender</i>	<i>Subject</i>	<i>Object</i>	<i>Genitive</i>		<i>Reflexive</i>
			<i>det.</i>	<i>ind.</i>	
1st, singular	I	me	my	mine	myself
1st, plural	we	us	our	ours	ourselves
2nd, singular	Use plural				yourself
2nd, plural	you	you	your	yours	yourselves
3rd, sing, masc.	he	him	his	his	himself
3rd, sing, fem.	she	her	her	hers	herself
3rd, sing, neut.	it	it	its	its	itself
3rd, plural	they	them	their	theirs	themselves
-	who	whom	whose	whose	-

as in the *subjective* case. As the name indicates, one of its uses is to distinguish the object from the subject of a verb. In the sentence “*She* loves *him*”, *she* is in the *subjective* and *him* in the *objective* case. The objective case is also used for a pronoun governed by a preposition – like *to* as in “Give the book *to me*”. This *objective case* in pronouns is one of the commonest sources of grammar difficulties for native speakers. We will discuss the usages: “It’s *I*”, versus “It’s *me*”, and “John gave it to my wife and *I*”, versus “John gave it to my wife and *me*”, as well as the uses of *whom*, in our chapter on Problems.

There are two *genitives*. The *determinative** is the ordinary one, as in “*her* book”. The *independent* one is used as the complement of the verb *to be*, as in “This book is *hers*”, or the emphatic “It’s *hers*”, or with “of” in “That book is one of *hers*”. Non-native learners, not unreasonably, sometimes find this “of + genitive” form confusing, forming as it does a sort of double possessive. They also mistakenly say things like “a friend of me”, instead of “a friend of mine”, using the general rule of a preposition being followed by the objective case. Note that *it’s* and *who’s* are short for “it is” and “who is”, while the genitives are *its* and *whose*. Not surprisingly, they are often confused.

Reflexive means that the word refers to another pronoun in the same passage, as in “*He*’ll do it *himself*”.

*Some books say the determinative genitives are not pronouns but determiners. See our chapter on *Other word classes*.

It can be used for added emphasis by altering the word order, as in “*He himself* will do it”.

There seems to be a lingering misunderstanding about *whose*, the genitive of *who*, which was once thought by some to apply only to people, but can be used quite properly for inanimate objects, as in “these books, whose subject is history”.

Pronouns are a useful feature of the language, often making it easy to avoid the clumsy repetition of a noun. When we discuss questions of “good” and “bad” style later, we will refer to the failure to use this facility, in what might be called “pronoun phobia”.

Another issue which affects them relates to *gender*. They all refer to nouns that may or may not have a gender. This does not matter for the first or second persons (*I, we, you*) but it may raise questions about concord (in this context, an exact synonym for “agreement”) with *he, she, it* and *they*. We will return to this matter also, in our chapter on Problems.

Verbs

THE MOST useful thing to learn about verbs is that, except for the *modal* ones, which we will come back to later, they have three forms that need to be known:

- (1) – the *base*, for example “love”,
- (2) – the *past form* (“loved”),
- (3) – the *-ed participle* (“loved”).

“*Past form*” and “*-ed participle*” are more generally applicable terms than the traditional “*past tense*” and “*past participle*”, even although in many cases the latter does not actually end in *-ed*! For regular verbs, (2) and (3) are the same. There is one more form, (4) the *-ing participle* (*present participle*), which does not have to be separately remembered, as it is always formed by adding *-ing* to the base. There are slight spelling complications in deriving the other three forms from the base, such as sometimes dropping an *e*, or doubling a consonant. These are shown in the dictionaries.

A few participles are different in American English. For example the regular British *fit*, *fitted*, *fitted* commonly becomes the irregular *fit*, *fit*, *fit*. There is even an extra participle in America, where *get*, *got*,

gotten can be used instead of *get*, *got*, *got*. *Webster* says *gotten* is an alternative to *got* “in most senses”, while *Oxford* says that the two forms are used in different ways. Both *Webster* and *Oxford* have doubts as to whether *gotten* is part of standard American English.

However, there are a great many *irregular* past tenses and *-ed* participles (which are often different from each other). The *CGEL* provides a list of the irregularly formed parts of 267 verbs, without claiming it to be complete. So there are probably very few people who carry the entire list in their heads, although most of it does seem to come easily enough to native speakers, after early childhood. This phenomenon is the topic of an interesting book, *Words and Rules*, by Steven Pinker. We provide a table of the most commonly needed irregular forms on pp. 39 and 40.

Probably the most troublesome verb in this respect is *lie*, *lay*, *lain*, as in (1) “I *lie* in bed”, (2) “I *lay* in bed”, and (3) “I have *lain* in bed”, which is confused with *lay*, *laid*, *laid*, as in (1) “I *lay* it on the bed”, (2) “I *laid* it on the bed”, and (3) “I have *laid* it on the bed”. The difference between “I *lie* in bed” and “I *lay* something on the bed” is that the first verb is *intransitive* – it does not have an object, while the second is *transitive* – it does have an object (“something” in the example). There is also another, unrelated, regularly formed verb, *lie*, meaning to tell an untruth; it gives “I *lie*”, “I *lied*”, and “I have *lied*”. The possibilities for confusion are

Some of the irregular verbs

be, was/were, been
begin, began, begun
bend, bent, bent
bite, bit, bitten
bleed, bled, bled
blow, blew, blown
break, broke, broken
bring, brought, brought
build, built, built
buy, bought, bought
catch, caught, caught
choose, chose, chosen
come, came, come
cost, cost, cost
cut, cut, cut
dig, dug, dug
do, did, done
draw, drew, drawn
drink, drank, drunk
drive, drove, driven
eat, ate, eaten
fall, fell, fallen
feed, fed, fed
feel, felt, felt
fight, fought, fought
find, found, found
fling, flung, flung
fly, flew, flown
forget, forgot, forgotten
freeze, froze, frozen
get, got, got
give, gave, given

go, went, gone
grind, ground, ground
grow, grew, grown
hang, hung, hung
have, had, had
hear, heard, heard
hide, hid, hidden
hit, hit, hit
hold, held, held
hurt, hurt, hurt
keep, kept, kept
know, knew, known
lay, laid, laid
lead, led, led
leave, left, left
lend, lent, lent
let, let, let
lie, lay, lain
light, lit, lit
lose, lost, lost
make, made, made
mean, meant, meant
meet, met, met
mistake, mistook, mistaken
pay, paid, paid
prove, proved, proved*
put, put, put

*or proven, mainly in Scottish law.

**Common and *-ing* forms pronounced like "reed", past and *-ed* forms like "red".

ride, rode, ridden
ring, rang, rung
rise, rose, risen
run, ran, run
saw, sawed, sawn
say, said, said
see, saw, seen
sell, sold, sold
send, sent, sent
sew, sewed, sewn
shake, shook, shaken
shine, shone, shone
shoot, shot, shot
show, showed, shown
shut, shut, shut
sing, sang, sung
sit, sat, sat
sleep, slept, slept
slide, slid, slid
slit, slit, slit
sow, sowed, sown
speak, spoke, spoken
spell, spelt, spelled
spend, spent, spent
spit, spat, spat
split, split, split
spoil, spoiled, spoilt

spread, spread, spread
spring, sprang, sprung
stand, stood, stood
steal, stole, stolen
stick, stuck, stuck
sting, stung, stung
stink, stank, stunk
strike, struck, struck
swear, swore, sworn
sweep, swept, swept
swell, swelled, swollen
swim, swam, swum
swing, swung, swung
take, took, taken
teach, taught, taught
tear, tore, torn
tell, told, told
think, thought, thought
throw, threw, thrown
wake, woke, woken
wear, wore, worn
weave, wove, woven
weep, wept, wept
wet, wet, wet
win, won, won
wind, wound, wound
write, wrote, written

Notes:

1. The verb “to be” is the only one to have a different plural form (“were”) in the past tense.
2. Words, like “foresee”, which contain another word that is in this sample (like “see”) have been omitted.
3. In a few instances, when there are alternatives, we have given only our own preferences.

obvious! The most common error is to use a transitive form when the intransitive is called for. Even a usually careful writer, Roger Ebert, can produce: “we would ... play with our dogs, or lay on our stomachs on the grass”, when he should have put “lie”.

To avoid using a technical term, *Oxford* replaces the word “transitive” by “with object”, and “intransitive” by “no object”, but it does not seem unreasonable to expect readers to know such terms, or to recognize, for example, that *v.i.* indicates *verb, intransitive*. It is certainly necessary to know what is meant. And you do need to recognize an *object* when you meet one!

The *base* is the form that is used, for example, as the headword in dictionaries. It functions in various ways as the *infinitive* of the verb, and is often referred to as such, commonly along with the *infinitive marker* “to”, as in “to love”. And it provides the present tense.

Verbs do have *tenses*, which we will be coming to, but they don’t vary by *gender*, and hardly at all by *person* or *number*, but there is one tiny exception, applying to most of them, that causes a lot of trouble. In the *third person singular* of the *present tense* in the *indicative mood* (which we will also be coming to) they add an *s* – I *love*, you *love*, we *love*, they *love*, but he, she or it *loves*. The modal verbs (see later) are an exception, for example he, she or it *can*, not *cans*.

In respect of these otherwise almost totally general rules about *number*, the verb “to be” is notably

irregular: present tense I *am*; we *are*; you *are*; he, she or it *is*; they *are*, and past tense I *was*; we *were*; you *were*; he, she or it *was*, they *were*.

Other small irregularities are that the third person singular present indicative of “*have*” is not “*haves*”, but *has*, while “do” and “go” add -*es* instead of -*s*, to give *does* and *goes*.

As we will see later, these indications of *number* in the verb – in the great majority of instances the presence or absence of that little letter *s* – are the source of some of the commonest grammatical difficulties in English. It all depends on making the right *concord* between the subject and the verb, which is by no means as simple as one might suppose. We will return to this difficulty in our chapter on Problems.

As well as *number*, *person*, and *tense*, verbs can exhibit something referred to as “*mood*”. The word is just a variant of “*mode*”, referring to the way or manner in which the verb is operating. The ordinary everyday form, when a statement is being made, is said to be in the *indicative* mood. The other moods that were recognized in Latin, the *imperative*, *interrogative*, *optative*, and *subjunctive*, played a part in the “great delusion” as we have called it, when school-children were expected to assign a *mood* to every verb, just as nouns had to have one of the six Latin *cases*. The English grammar term *conditional* mood is no longer in use.

It can be said that “Come here!” is in the *imperative* mood, or “Are you coming?” is in the *interrogative*, but these attributions have no practical consequences. Besides the indicative, the only mood that survives *in the form of the words* is the *subjunctive*. It is used for what is imagined, wished for, or impossible.

As to its inflections, it differs from the indicative in that the third person singular does not add an *s*. The subjunctive of the verb *be* is irregular: it usually has *were* for all persons and numbers, although some other largely obsolete usages may still turn up, such as: “It is essential that he *be* told”. It is to be found in the occasional “*were-subjunctive*”, as in “If it *were* only him, and not his whole family, I wouldn’t mind”. Even that use is increasingly unusual, because it is being replaced by the *indicative* mood in the *past form*^{*}, as in “If it *was* only him ...”. But note the surviving set phrases that begin with *if*, as in “If I *were* a rich man” or “If I *were* you”, and also “I wish I *were* ...”.

However, the use of the subjunctive is one of the more conspicuous features that differentiate American from British English. American usage would favour the above example, “he *be* told” whereas the British usage would more often be: “he *should be* told”. In the American version “*be*” is third person singular *subjunctive* (the *indicative* would be “*is*”) while in the

^{*}Presumably because the user assumes, in effect, that “it *were*” must be a mistake, but that nevertheless what is wanted, for no apparent reason, is the past tense!

British version “be” is the *base* form, after the auxiliary “should”. Apart from explaining “If I were ...”, etc., the commoner American usage, and a few formulas like “God save the Queen!”, the subjunctive mood has little importance. For a full account see the *CGEL*.

The old grammar books said that the verbs have several *tenses* – seven was a popular number – but as we will show, we can produce even more than that, by similar methods. Modern textbooks take a much tighter line, and say there are only two, the *present tense* and the *past tense*. The *present* is just the base form (like “love”) throughout, except for the third person singular with its *s*, and the irregularities of the verbs *be*, *do*, *go*, and *have*. The *past tense* uses the second of our four forms throughout, many of which of course are irregular, not only *was/were*, *did*, *got*, and *had*, but many others. These two tenses are all that a verb can do *by itself* to indicate time.

Any other ways of expressing time (including the future) need additional wording. What were once seen as *tenses* are now referred to as *verbal phrases expressing time*. This does seem to be a clearer way of naming them. In dealing with the big and rather difficult question of how English can deal with *time*, with only two verb tenses, we can start with a backward look at how the grammar books used to explain it. They had a set of standard phrases, each named as a tense, including *future*, *past perfect*, etc. These phrasal forms are constructed from the *base form* or the *-ed* or *-ing*

participles, along with *auxiliary verbs* which in most cases can change for *tense*, *number*, and *person*.

For talking about the present we have, as well as the present tense, “*I walk*”, a phrase that is referred to as the *present continuous* (or *progressive*), “*I am walking*”. It uses the verb *be* and the *-ing* participle.

Similarly, as well as the past tense, “*I walked*”, there is the *past continuous*: “*I was walking*”. Then in addition there are the *perfect* form, “*I have walked*”, and the *past perfect*: “*I had walked*”, with the verb “have” and the *-ed* participle. These also have *continuous* forms: “*I have been walking*”, and “*I had been walking*”.

There is no future tense. The verbal phrase that used to be given the name employs the base form with the auxiliary “will”, as in “*I will* (or *shall**) *walk*”. We can also have a *future perfect*, “*I will have walked*”, with a *continuous* form: “*I will have been walking*”.

These “quasi tenses” do not exhaust the range of ways in which time can be indicated. With the verb “go”, we can make “*I go walking*” (*present, habitual*), or for the *future* “*I am going walking*”, and “*I am going to go walking*”, or the *future perfect* “*I am going*

*The choice used to be taught everywhere. For emphasis “shall” and “will” were interchanged. The ordinary first person was “I shall walk”, but the emphatic version was “I *will* walk”, and in the second and third persons you had the ordinary “you/she will walk” and the emphatic “you/she *shall* walk”. Both “will” and “shall” are in any case very often reduced to “...’ll” as in “we’ll go”.

to have walked". For the *past*, we can have "*I went walking*", "*I have gone walking*", or "*I had gone walking*".

Then there is the phrase "*used to*". It does not fit into any of the more usual types of time expressions. It indicates something that happened in the past but no longer does, as in "*I used to walk*" (but now I take the bus). It confuses learners because it resembles "*I am used to walking*", which is not a time phrase, but just means that I am accustomed to walking. The interrogative is "*Did you use to walk?*" (without a *d*) to which the most likely replies would be either "*Yes, I did*" or "*No, I didn't*". The full negative version is "*I used not to walk*" but, for example, "*I never used to walk*" might sound more natural. The grammatical construction of "*I used to walk*" is the same as the modal constructions we will be coming to, like "*I ought to walk*", but "*use*" does not otherwise function as a modal verb, and so it is not listed as one.

We don't propose to look deeply into all the many usages involved in indicating time, but one feature worth noting is that the tense of the verb does not always correspond to the time referred to. You can say "*John starts* [present tense] his new job next week" or "*He is coming* [present continuous] home tomorrow". Similarly, "*I am going* to do something" uses the present continuous, but the action is in the future, whereas "*I am doing* something" can refer either to the present or the future – maybe right now, or maybe

tomorrow. On the other hand, “He *will be* at home now” refers to the present, although “he *will be* at home tomorrow” is equally possible. They mean that that is where he probably is, or will be.

There is another feature of the verb to be included in this account, known for some reason* as its *voice*. It will be familiar to most readers as the distinction between *active* and *passive*. Our principal reference books, both the *CGEL* and *Burchfield*, have a great deal to say about it, but the basic idea is simple enough. If you take a statement, such as “John opened the door” (active), you can rearrange it, *without changing its meaning*, as “The door was opened by John” (passive). Or you can omit “by John”, and just say “The door was opened”. These two results are known as the “long” and the “short” passives. The *object* of the active voice has become the *subject* of the passive, and the *subject* of the active has either become the *agent*, or been discarded. Obviously, you can only form a passive with a transitive verb – but once the transformation has been effected, the verb has no object.

Why would you want to do such a thing? Most often, it is to change the relative importance of the two parts. The original statement gives some credit to John, while the passive version is more interested in the door, even to the point that John may disappear from the statement altogether.

*The *Oxford English Dictionary* does not explain why “voice” was chosen for this grammatical term, but only records its history.

It seems to us that the word “style” has two different connotations in relation to languages. The one we have been using so far is much the same as “usage” – about getting things right, in accordance with some model, including such desiderata as using standard units of measure, as well as appropriate typography. Its other significance has to do with aesthetics. A good “style” in this sense will please the reader, and thereby make for “readability”. This is where *voice* plays a prominent role. It is a favourite idea of the largely self-appointed “style” pundits, that one should avoid the passive as much as possible. They have a point, although it has been overstated.

In America the most influential of them have been the duo, Strunk and White, although as we noted in our Introduction they have recently been under attack. Some of what they wrote (in *The Elements of Style*) is worth reading and taking to heart, but their denunciation of the passive voice cannot be taken very seriously. Their Rule 14 says baldly “*Use the active voice*”. However, they go on to admit that “... the passive voice ... is frequently convenient and sometimes necessary”. It is indeed.

Burchfield allows himself more space for details on the uses of the passive, and also points out, for instance, that some verbs or verbal phrases, such as “to be reputed” or “to be said to be”, only exist in this voice.

Next, we have an odd little problem, which often presents a difficulty for non-native speakers, in how

to answer a *negative question*. If someone asks a woman: “Are you not going to marry John?”, and she isn’t, does she reply “Yes”, meaning “Yes, I’m not going to ...” or “No” meaning “No, I’m not going to ...”? Illogically, perhaps, English usage requires “No” – unless of course she does intend to do so, when it is “Yes (I am ...)”.

We now turn to the short list of *modal* verbs: *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *must*, *ought*, *shall*, *should*, *will*, and *would*. The last two sometimes have non-modal uses. In addition, *need* can be either a modal or a non-modal verb, while *dare* can have a few of the grammatical features of a modal.

Modals are defined as verbs that express necessity or possibility. They are always associated with some other verb, although it may not appear in the same sentence. “Can you speak Gaelic?” “No, I can’t”. In the second sentence “*speak Gaelic*” is *understood*.

They have no infinitives and no participles. You can’t say “to may” or “he mayed” or “he is maying”. For “can” and “could” you can provide a partial substitute by using “to be able”, “is able”, “was able”, etc. “Could”, “might” and “would” are the past tenses of “can”, “may” and “will”, but they also function in other ways as independent words. “Must” and “ought” have no past tenses. It is partly because “need”, “dare”, and “will” do have infinitives, past forms, -ed and -ing participles, that we know that they are not always “modal”.

The above is intended to give an overview of this curious class (or sub-class) of words. Separately, each of them is adequately described for practical purposes in the *Oxford* on-line dictionary. Here we will add only a few remarks on particular points.

We have already mentioned “shall” and “will” with reference to future time and their emphatic use; “shall” in fact is tending to be used less than ever as time goes on, except in some polite formulas, including the well known American one: “Shall we ... ?” (go in to dinner, or whatever – left unsaid). See *Oxford* for the use of the related words “should” and “would”, which do many other things besides being the past tenses. One that is worth learning and being taught is: “Would you like ... (some tea, or whatever) ?”, as a slightly politer question than “Do you want ...?”

While the use of the modal “will” (or “shall”) is the commonest way to supply a substitute for the non-existent future tense, the other modals can also be used in similar verbal phrases, most of which also imply future time. In “I will go home tomorrow” you can substitute any of the other modals for “will”, adding “to” in “dare to”, “need to” and “ought to”. In some cases you can also insert the verb “have”, as in “I may have to go”, or of course an adverb, as in “I *really* must go”. Understanding what all these mean is easy enough. Learning how to use them when translating into English is more difficult, but the choices that present themselves are often quite open and unimportant.

Until quite recent times, children were reproved for asking “Can I go home now?” when it should have been “May I ...”, on the grounds that “can” refers to the physical possibility, while requesting permission calls for “may”. This is now a lost cause, and in this context the two words have become interchangeable, with “can” the commoner of the two.

As well as being its past tense, “might” is used simply as an alternative to “may”, although it also has independent uses. The two words have been so mixed up that for many purposes they are now regarded as being simply interchangeable. Most people, however, would agree that “may have” is quite often undesirable, when “might have” would be better – a rather strange grammatical ruling! An example would be: “the driver stopped, although it may have been legal to go on”. This error, such as it is, occurs when “may” is applied to the past rather than to the present or the future. Sometimes it really is an error, as in this, from the *New York Times*: “Romney may have been applauded if he had chosen to express [regret]”. In this instance it should clearly have been the past tense “might”.

As well as the whole group of modals there are two heavily used little verbs, “do” and “go”, that need special attention.

“Do” is often a point of difficulty for non-native learners. *Burchfield* says it is one of the most complicated words in the language. *Oxford* gives an astonishingly long list of examples of its use. It used to

be heard, and occasionally still is, in the standard question exchanged – spoken by both parties – when an introduction was being made in polite society: “How do you do?”. This combines two of its uses, the first as an auxiliary and the second as a main verb. The latter would normally convey some idea like “how are you getting along”, but here it is only a meaningless formula. The first “do” is performing its commonest function, introducing a question.

In fact this is often the only available way of asking a question. Forms like “Work they here?” are not possible, and the form “Do they work here?” has become obligatory. Note that the verb and subject don’t exchange places. The answer also uses *do*, very often leaving out the main verb, as in: “Yes, they do”, or “No, they don’t” – and note that “do not” is normally reduced to “don’t”, while “do not” is more emphatic. Or indeed the answer might be just “Yes” or “No”.

For usages other than this essential one, we can only suggest that the reader should go to *Burchfield* or some other more detailed guide than this. They should look not only under *do*, but also under *tag questions*. These are the short formulas added to some remark, such as: “They work here, *don’t they?*”. Note that *isn’t it* is only used after “(it) is” and not like a general translation of the more widely applied French *n’est pas*.

The other very small verb *go* also has some idiomatic uses, but they are much less complicated than those of *do*. One difference between American and British

usage is worth noting, although it is not absolute, and the two constructions are both found in each variety. Americans are more likely to say, for example, “Go find (something)” while the British prefer “Go *and* find (something)”.

Phrasal verbs are those which form a unit usually of two words, a verb and a preposition or an adverb, like “sleep in” or “go astray”. Many new ones originate in America and are denounced in British English, because the additional words, as in “meet *up* (*with*)” add nothing to the meaning of the verb. “Listen up” may be excused as a humorous way of getting attention. There are occasional arguments about word order – do you say “wake up the cook” or “wake the cook up”. In this and similar cases either seems to be acceptable.

We have left one topic to the end of this chapter, the confusing one of *verbal nouns*. Much of the confusion lies in the terminology and definitions. So we can start with one simplification: we will not use the alternative term *gerund*, but leave that for Latin, where it rightly belongs. In this we are in agreement with the *CGEL*, but not with *Burchfield* or many others. The truth of the matter is that the reality being described is not easy to sort out into a neat and tidy pattern. The words in question have overlapping idiomatic uses, and it is sometimes not easy to decide how the grammatical labels apply.

We do not include those words (like *action*, *treatment*, etc.) whose only connection with a verb is that

they retain some *semantic* trace of it. The meaning of *action* and *treatment* must have something to do with *act* and *treat*, but they do not work *syntactically* in any way like verbs, in the construction of phrases and sentences.

The words we are trying to pin down as verbal nouns all end in *-ing*, but obviously we must exclude those that are just being part of the conjugation of verbs – the “-ing participles” – that work with auxiliary verbs to form the “continuous” or “progressive” expressions of time, as in “I *was reading* a magazine”.

We must also exclude those that are being used as simple adjectives, as in “an *interesting* book” or “a *walking* stick”, or adverbs, as in “*smiling*, the boy fell dead”. Adjectives and adverbs in general will be dealt with in our next chapter.

This leaves us here only with those words ending in *-ing* which show some of the grammatical features of both nouns and verbs in their relation to other words. We must stress that this account is our own simplification. We think it is justified by the fact that no two dictionaries or other authorities entirely agree with each other. Our conclusion, however, does at least conform to the latest *Oxford* definition of *verbal noun*.

The best way of showing what they are, and how they are used, is to provide a few specimens. Then in each case you can ask about which noun and which verb characteristics it shows. On the one hand, as a noun, could it possess or be possessed by another noun, could

it be replaced by a pronoun, could it have a plural, could it take an adjective (or a “determiner”) or could it be the subject or the object of a verb? On the other hand, to show that it is partly a verb, could it take an adverb, could you imagine what its grammatical subject or object might be, or could you think of it in association with an auxiliary verb?

Here are some specimens. Note, of course, that while they are verbal nouns here, the same words can act also as participles or adjectives elsewhere – but there is nothing unusual about that!

Painting was his hobby.

The Aegean is great for *sailing*.

Smoking causes lung cancer.

Much of his time was taken up by *travelling*.

Do try to test them, as suggested, as both verbs and nouns, by asking how they relate to other words, or by adding words, *in these sentences*. For example “painting”, as the subject of the verb “was”, is a *noun*, while as a *verb* it can itself easily be given an object, such as “animals”.

Other word classes

ONE TREND in modern grammar books has been for them to use more ordinary language themselves, and surely “word classes” is an improvement on the traditional term “parts of speech”.

We began with a chapter on the *articles*, a subdivision of the class of *determiners*, with the idea of showing our readers how a close look at these innocent little words reveals the complexity of the grammatical rules they must obey. Also, since our rules about them are particular to our language, and many other languages don’t even have any articles, they have a special importance for non-native learners.

This was followed by chapters on the two really essential word classes, the *nouns* and the *verbs*, interposing one on the *pronouns*, which are important as stand-ins for the nouns, and also for having preserved a little more of the ancient grammar.

Now, to complete the picture, we must add notes on the other classes, but first it may be useful to discuss the classification itself. Like so much else in language studies, it has a deceptive simplicity. “Everybody knows” what a *noun* or a *verb* is. But as we have seen, the sub-class of *verbal nouns* is less easy to pin down.

The class of *determiners* is a fairly recent innovation, and although it is accepted by our main authority, the *CGEL*, there still seems to be some disagreement about it. The word *particle* is something tacked on to the rest of the scheme, and the different uses of *modifier* could be confusing.

The grouping of words into classes and subclasses is radically different from biological taxonomy. Most obviously, while an animal or plant can only belong to one species or one variety, the same word – not only spelt the same way, but containing the same essential idea – can occupy more than one class. It is not the word, as such, which is being classified, but its uses in each of various ways.

The dictionaries, of course, accept this. To take just one example at random, *Oxford* deals with the word “fake” under three subheads, the classes noun, adjective, and verb – in fact much as if they were three different words. And as we have seen, a word ending in *-ing* can generally be part of a verb, an adjective, or a verbal noun, according to how it is used.

It is important to appreciate the point, that in modern grammar the classification depends primarily on how a word relates *syntactically* to other words. It is not very helpful for teachers to tell their pupils that “a noun is the name of something”. It is more to the point to demonstrate that *on a given occasion* the word in question is the subject or the object of a verb, or the complement of a preposition, that it has an associated

determiner or an adjective, or that it has a genitive case or a plural noun form. A noun need not meet all of these criteria, but it will usually satisfy more than one of them.

Biological taxonomy is also much better settled and organized than the grammatical allocation of words (or rather, their uses) to classes. Whatever differences there are between botanical “splitters” and “lumpers” (who want each species to include either a narrower or a wider range of small differences) or whatever other arguments there may be, there is a formal mechanism for sorting things out, and in general, practising biologists know how things stand at the present time.

Grammarians, on the other hand, still differ on first principles. *Burchfield*, for example, completely ignores the term *determiner*, while *Greenbaum* suggests a new class that would include both *determiners* and *pronouns*. The *CGEL* goes so far as to say that some aspects of grammar may be “indeterminate” and a complete analysis impossible. Modern grammarians are increasingly ready to make their classifications less rigid, and to recognize, for example, that a word classed in a particular usage as a preposition may have some of the features of an adverb. So it is not surprising that they are not all that sure about how the list of classes should be compiled and each one defined, or about which class or classes a word should be assigned to.

Burchfield’s list of “parts of speech” seems slightly eccentric, in that it includes *auxiliary verb* as a class,

and not just as a sub-class of *verb*. The rest of his list is: *noun, verb, adjective, adverb, pronoun, preposition, conjunction, article, interjection, and numeral*.

The *CGEL* shares *Burchfield's* concern for retaining traditional concepts. However, it does accept the term *word classes*, and notes that they come in two groups, open and closed, that is, those that do or do not accept new members. That might be one reason for separating *adjectives* (open) from *determiners* (closed). The open ones are *noun, adjective, full verb, and adverb*. The closed ones are: *preposition, pronoun, determiner, conjunction, modal verb and primary verb* – *Burchfield's* “*auxiliary verb*” combines the last two. Then the *CGEL* adds the “two lesser classes”, *numerals* – which elsewhere it includes in *determiners* (!) – and *interjections*, and also a few “words of unique function” like the *negative particle* “not” and the *infinitive marker* “to”.

Oxford has useful things to say about each of the word classes. It accepts “to” as the *infinitive marker* (a one-word class) but lists “not” traditionally, as an *adverb*. It is indeed most often attached to a verb, adjective, or other adverb, expressed or understood.

One definition of *determiners* is simply that they are the words (like *every, this, or several*) that include, or can take the place of, the articles *the* or *a(n)*. Although this is not really a definition, it may be helpful.

On this analogy, although the point is disputed, determiners should also include *numerals*, not only the

cardinal numbers (one, two, three ..., or 1, 2, 3 ...) but possibly also the ordinals (first, second, third ..., or 1st, 2nd, 3rd ...). The cardinal numbers are often, and the ordinals nearly always, preceded by what is also classed as a determiner, as in “the three sisters” or “every tenth man”.

Some books put the words that are usually listed as *determinative genitive* (or *possessive*) *pronouns* in the class of *determiners*. The *CGEL*, which we have followed in listing them as the genitive case of the pronouns, notes that they can *act as* determiners – and you might think, if you have followed the story this far, that when they are acting as determiners, they really are, *ipso facto*, determiners! However, *any* genitive can have “a determinative function”. In their syntactical relations, there is no difference between “my book” and “John’s book” or “the boy’s book”.

But no one would say that “John” or “boy” are not nouns, or deny that nouns and pronouns can have a genitive case. So far as we know, no serious suggestion has been made that all genitives should be classed as determiners! In fact there seems to be a clash of ideas. The classification *ought* to be based on actual use, but we can’t get it out of our heads that “my” is really a *pronoun*, and “boy’s” is a *noun*, even when they are clearly acting as *determiners*. One even wonders if fashionability comes into it. At one time “my” was an *adjective*, then it was the genitive of a *pronoun*, and now the latest mode may be to call it a *determiner*.

We see ourselves as outsiders trying to help our readers to make sense of these differing expert views. One point that seems rather striking is that the syntactical relationship between *nouns* and *pronouns* on the one hand and *adjectives* and *determiners* (including *articles* and *numerals*) on the other is closely similar. One might even be so bold as to wonder why these last three (even if they do seem to group rather special kinds of word) should not be seen as sub-classes of *adjective*. At first sight *determiner* seems to be a reasonable expansion of the class of *articles*, but in the end it may only cause confusion, so *Burchfield* may have been right to reject it. Traditionally, most *determiners*, including *articles* and *numerals*, and even the genitives of *pronouns*, like “my”, were simply *adjectives* – and they do all modify nouns.

Then, if we inquire about that rather mysterious term *particle* (so far mentioned only as exemplified by *not*) we now find that the *Oxford* definition of it is: “any of the class of words such as *in*, *up*, *off*, *over*, used with verbs to make phrasal verbs”. However, except in this definition, *particle* is not referred to anywhere as a word class. Rather, as stated, it is used – in a different sort of categorization – to comprise those words, from the two properly so-called word classes, *prepositions* and *adverbs*, that combine with ordinary *verbs* to form the *phrasal verbs* that we referred to in our chapter on Verbs. The *CGEL* gives a long list of such *particles*.

Faced with these and other confusing terminological complications and differences of opinion, we think that all we can do here is to try to pick out a few things about some named word classes that commonly affect actual usage.

We have no more to say about *determiners*. Before we get down to the other individual classes, we should note that two of them, *adjectives* and *adverbs*, have a lot in common. Many words can be either an adjective or an adverb, and in other instances an adjective and an adverb may be closely related in some way.

Essentially, in modern terms, adjectives give additional information about nouns or pronouns, and adverbs about verbs, other adverbs, or adjectives*. In their simplest uses we can say that a man is “strong” (*adjective*) or that he works “hard” (*adverb*). “Strong” describes the man (*noun*), and “hard” describes how he works (*verb*). In either case we can add another adverb, such as “very”, and say he is a very strong man, or that he works very hard.

One feature that most of them have in common is that they are *gradable*. That is to say, you can make them mean more, or in some instances less, than the word itself. One way of doing this is by inflection, using the endings *-er* and *-est*, as in *big*, the comparative *bigger*, and the superlative *biggest*. In one rather curious instance, the adjective *good* and the adverb

*The old grammar books tended to use *adverb* to collect up all words that couldn't be fitted into their classification elsewhere.

well both do this not by just adding *-er* and *-est*, but by using the same other words for the comparative and superlative – *better* and *best* – neither of which is derived from either *good* or *well*. Another similar set of irregular gradable adjectives and adverbs is *bad* and *badly*, *worse* and *worst*.

Grading to produce exactly the same result can be done by using the adverbs “more” and “most”. For a word like “common”, you can say either “commoner” and “commonest”, or “more common” and “most common”. In this instance you have another option – you can also say “less common” and “least common”. Moreover, the corresponding adverb “commonly” also has the whole range of five grades, from “least commonly” to “most commonly”. The usual convention is that one-syllable words like “big” use *-er* and *-est*; while words of three syllables or more, like “delicious”, require “more”, “most”, “less”, and “least”; and words of two syllables (like “common”) can do it either way.

You cannot use the superlative for one of only two items, and to do so is wrong. It has to be “the older” of two brothers, not “the oldest”.

Instead of “more”, “most”, “less” or “least” you can often put other adverbs like “very” (or “not very”), “fairly”, etc. These may be referred to as *degree modifiers*. Most are *premodifiers*, coming before the words they modify, but there are also a few *postmodifiers*, like “enough”, as in “to bend easily enough”. It is rather confusing that *modifier* is some-

times used to mean *all* adjectives, particles, numerals and adverbs, as well as adjectival or adverbial phrases – anything at all, in fact, that alters the meaning of another word. None of these groupings is regarded as a word class; “modifier” here is just another word used to describe them.

Some adjectives and adverbs are not gradable, because of their meaning. Until fairly recently the most obvious example would have been *unique(ly)*, but since the misuse of the word has made its proper meaning an all but lost cause, we will defer a discussion of all such words until our chapter on Problems.

The *CGEL* goes into great detail about adverbs that are the same as adjectives, adjectives that have no corresponding adverb or vice versa, as well as exceptions to the usual rules about gradability, etc. In the end it almost seems that each available formation, and each unacceptable usage, has to be learned separately as part of our knowledge of the vocabulary. As usual, it all comes naturally to the native speaker.

Adjectives and adverbs are favourite topics for the critics of bad style, picked on in the same way as the passive voice of verbs, which we have already discussed. Lesser pundits sometimes even advise writers to go through their first drafts and strike out all or most of these words. There is some truth in the contention that they are over-used, but as a general response this recommendation is far too strong.

The word “slow” is normally used as an adjective (“a slow learner”, “the journey was slow”). It is also used as an adverb in certain specific contexts, including compounds such as “slow-acting” and “slow-moving” and in the expression “go slow”. Its other adverbial uses are informal and usually regarded as sub-standard, as for example in “he drives too slow”. In such contexts standard English uses “slowly”. The use of “slow” and “slowly” contrasts with the use of “fast”, which is completely standard in its uses as both an adjective and an adverb, and there is no word “fastly”.

Now we can get down to a few notes on each of the generally recognized classes. Even more than for the rest of this book, these can only be highly selective. For the full story we can only say “See the *CGEL*”.

An *adjective* can be linked to its noun in either of two ways. When it is “*attributive*” it is usually put before the noun, as in “a beautiful cat” or in some contexts after it, as in “the body beautiful”. When it is “*predicative*” it is connected to the noun by some part of the verb to be, as in “she is beautiful”. Some adjectives can only be used in one of these ways, and some only in the other.

We will deal with the position of adjectives, and their order in the sentence, in our chapter on Word Order, and only note here that they form a special case, simply because a single noun may attract several adjectives, while their ordering reflects their significance, and is not always left to chance.

There is often a choice, when particular adjectives and nouns are frequently paired, of hyphenating or combining the words, as with “lower case”, lower-case” or “lowercase”. In this example *Oxford* uses two words.

See also near the end of our chapter on Nouns, where we mentioned their attributive use (as in “tea party”, etc.) retaining their noun classification – but looking very like adjectives!

One rather unusual characteristic of adjectives in English, as opposed to other European languages, lies in what they *don’t* do – they make no inflectional changes to match the noun they are modifying. Think of the French *beau, belle, beaux, and belles*, which are all the same word, as it is used with masculine, feminine, singular and plural nouns.

Turning to *adverbs*, there is an interesting one, *hopefully* (as in: “Hopefully, this argument is now over”), that almosts demands some mention. It became the target of much criticism when it first came into use, as a sentence opener, in the mid-twentieth century. *Burchfield* still felt obliged to deal with the controversy at some length, in 1996. There is also quite a long usage note in the current *Oxford* on-line dictionary. They both put it in the sub-class of *sentence adverbs*, meaning that it applies to the sentence as a whole, rather than just to the verb.

The *CGEL* does not itself apply this term to “hopefully”, but mentions it in discussing adverbs that

modify more than a single verb. Rather than sharing the amateur linguists' view that "hopefully" is an inadmissible neologism, the *CGEL* points to its usefulness, giving an example in which it occurs alongside "I hope ...", and can be seen to express a different shade of meaning. All agree that it is not like most other adverbs of this "sentence" type, in that it cannot be paraphrased in quite the same way, for example, as "regrettably..." ("It is regrettable that ..."). But they do not accept this as an adequate reason for rejecting it. In our view "hopefully" is a perfectly acceptable sentence adverb – as for that matter is "thankfully", which has not been similarly decried, although it has the same grammatical characteristics.

A few other questions of adverb usage come up fairly often, for example the presence or absence of an added "s" in upward(s), downward(s), backward(s), forward(s), sideward(s), westward(s), etc. The nearest we can get to a general rule here is to say that more often than not the "s" is unnecessary and undesirable.

More often, the difficulty is to see why a word is classed as an adverb at all, when the same word can very often be put in some other group, such as prepositions, adjectives, or conjunctions. The test ought to be whether, and just how, the word in question relates to a verb, an adjective, or another adverb. To take a simple example, the word "however" is a rather unusual one, if only in the demands it makes on punctuation. In its commoner uses, *Oxford* classes it as an

adverb, and gives an example in which the second sentence reads: “However, gaining weight is not inevitable”. What exactly is “however” modifying here? Perhaps it would pass muster as a “sentence adverb”? Then again, you could replace it by “But” – removing the comma – and “But” would undoubtedly be a conjunction, not an adverb.

The underlying truth, we think, is that in the last resort the taxonomy of words serves only for general convenience, and is by no means an exact science.

Let us now move on to *prepositions*. We have already recounted their prominent role in “The great delusion”. It is surprising that this story still reverberates and that even *Burchfield*, for example, still feels obliged to discuss the question of when it might be best, in formal English, to avoid putting a preposition at the end of a sentence.

But probably there really are people who would say that “He is the man to whom you spoke” sounds better than “He is the man you spoke to”. Note, by the way, that you couldn’t possibly put “who” here instead of “whom”, while in the alternative version you could have the man *whom*, *who*, or even *that* you spoke to. *Burchfield* goes through the list of circumstances in which the *CGEL* points out that the preposition may or even must come at the end. His “final verdict” comes as something of a surprise: “In most circumstances, esp[ecially] in formal writing, it is desirable to avoid placing a preposition at the end of a sentence ...”. Our

own humble opinion is that you would do well to remember Winston Churchill – see p.10 – but not let this whole dubious question worry you unduly.

For most purposes you will find the entry under *preposition* in *Oxford* perfectly adequate. It has a simple, clear definition, notes that prepositions played a key role in the “great delusion”, and is one of many sources for the Churchill story. On the other hand, the *CGEL* shows that the concept of a preposition is not that simple, and that sometimes there may be a gradient between *preposition* and another class, such as *conjunction*, or even *adjective*. We will take up some of the questions that arise, in our chapter on Problems.

Preposition is supposed to be a closed word class, and the *CGEL* lists 70 of them, not counting “marginal” or “complex” prepositions. The closure is obviously not watertight, however, given that it includes some that must be fairly recent additions, like *vis-à-vis*. The common ones are words such as “above”, “below”, “in”, “on”, “to”, “under”, or “with”. A long time ago, “in to” and “on to” were each written as two words, but “into” is now much commoner, and “onto” is also widely used.

Prepositions always have an associated noun or pronoun, as in “under the table”, “on horseback” or “to me”. They commonly precede their complement but, as is now very well known, they may also be separated from it, as at the end of the clause or sentence. There are often two together, as in “*near to*

you”, but “Come *out from in under* there!” is only a humorous exaggeration.

One feature that we will refer to again in “Problems” is that prepositions govern pronouns in the objective case, as in “to me”, not “to I”.

Conjunctions are next. They are supposed to form a closed class, but we have not found any definitive list. From various sources, mainly the *CGEL*, we have assembled the following one, of words or phrases that are at least occasionally conjunctions: *after, along with, although, and, as, as if, as soon as, as well as, before, but, for, further, how, if, or, since, then, this, though, till, until, when, where, while, whose, why*. In addition, *like* occurs at least in sub-standard English. Then many participles (-*ed* and -*ing* forms) of verbs can be added to the list; the *CGEL* cites as examples: *given, provided, and seeing*, each of which is commonly combined with the word *that*, as in *given that*.

As to the allocation of words to this class, it ranges from the obvious *and* and *but* – which “everybody knows” – to the exceedingly obscure examples that are scattered through many pages of the *CGEL*. Many are said to be part conjunction and part adverb or preposition, and the authors of the *CGEL* make several remarks about the difficulty they find in producing any simple, clear-cut classification. It would be quite impossible to condense all this finely argued grammar into a little book like this one. The real interest is in trying to explain the function of a word in each

particular case, rather than just pigeon-hole them under the labels of word classes. You could say, we think, that all this is excellent material for anyone interested in grammar as a subject of study, but that it has little direct application to reading or writing.

When you are trying to work out just how a passage of text is put together, it is often easy enough to recognize a conjunction as the word that links parts of it, most often “like with like” – nouns with nouns, clauses with clauses, or sentences with sentences. One of the old mythical rules of grammar was that you couldn’t use a conjunction to start a sentence, linking it to the preceding one, but as you may have noticed, we have done just that quite often in this book, and in fact it is common enough in modern usage.

A conjunction can be placed between the two items being connected, or before the first one. You can say either “You should come tomorrow, *if it’s possible*”, or “*If it’s possible*, you should come tomorrow”.

If a clause or sentence has a subject in the singular, followed by *along with ...* or *as well as ...*, it is nearly always best to regard the extra item (or items) as being in a parenthetical phrase, sometimes marked off by commas, and to keep the verb in the singular. For example, in a BBC news item: “... Campbelltown, along with Dunoon, were most vulnerable to downturn”. By this rule “*were*” should have been “*was*”.

A series of items can be linked by punctuation, with only one conjunction before the last item. The simplest

type is, for example: “apples, pears, oranges *and* lemons”. If there is any chance of a misunderstanding it is useful to insert the so-called “Oxford comma” after the second last item. There is an amusing example on the Internet (on the web site *WriteWords*) of the need for one: “The greatest influences on his life were his parents, Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher”. Some “house styles” require its use even if it is not needed to prevent ambiguity – this is a matter of opinion.

In connecting a series of items, each of which is itself a series separated by commas, it is usual to put semi-colons instead of commas after each of the larger groupings.

We have now accounted for almost every kind of word in one way or another, leaving only those that are labelled as *interjections*. They are well known to Scrabble players and often there is some argument about what exactly can be admitted. Some of them are written as two letters, like *ah*, *eh*, *oh*, *uh* (but no *ih*!) , but there are longer ones, like the soothing “there, there”. Sometimes they are printed separately, sometimes tacked on to a sentence, but not really part of it grammatically. Most people would hesitate to call any one of them a sentence, by itself.

Word order

ENGLISH IS A “word order” language. It is classed as an “svo” (subject, verb, object) one. A typical statement, when all three are present, would be “[S] the man [V] ate [O] his dinner”. Different orders are used for special purposes, such as questions, or in poetry, but the sov order, “the man his dinner ate”, is not normally possible*.

“He is here” is a statement. “Is he here?” is a question. The ordinary way of asking a question with the verb *to be* is this simple reversal of word order for the subject and the verb, as in changing “he is” to “is he”. There is a complication, in that “He is here?” can also be a question, indicated in speech by the tone of voice, or in writing by a question mark.

The most basic differences in meaning can be expressed by the order of identical words. “The boy chased the dog” means something quite different from “The dog chased the boy”. It is because *the word order is meaningful* that it is possible to do without any inflections to show, for example, which noun is the subject and which is the object. The survival of an

*See Burchfield, under *inversion*, for some unusual and doubtfully desirable exceptions.

objective case in the pronouns serves little or no purpose. When the pronoun cases are misused by young children or in dialects, the meaning is not lost.

An inflected dative case has not survived even in the pronouns. Its primary use in other languages is to mark the indirect object, and English pronouns use the ordinary objective case for this purpose. If we say “I gave her it”, “I” is the subject, “it” is the object, and “her” is the indirect object. In this instance strict word order is not needed, because the context will tell you that the thing given is “it”. According to the *CGEL* (see Introduction), we could also write “I gave it her” or, perhaps more likely, “to her”. When nouns are used the word order is more demanding. You have to say “John gave his mother flowers”, not “John gave flowers his mother” – or you could opt once again for using a preposition to mark the indirect object, and put “John gave flowers to his mother”. But it is striking that English *can* give the meaning by word order alone, without using either cases or prepositions.

When you learn French, you find that one of the most obvious differences from English is in the position and order of adjectives and nouns. The English rule on position is simpler – adjectives usually precede nouns, although there can be exceptions. In French, some common kinds of adjective regularly follow the noun. Compare “a little black cat” with “*un petit chat noir*”. Observe that in both cases any other positions for these words would be very unusual.

One of the more obscure grammatical questions can be the correct order of adjectives when there are more than one next to each other before the noun. There *are* general rules, which do, for example put “little” before “black”. Most native speakers go through life without knowing anything about the theoretical rules, but somehow manage to apply them with no apparent difficulty.

Burchfield discusses the *position* of adjectives at some length, but has nothing to say about *order*. However, the *CGEL* does deal with order in great detail, and a useful short summary is given by Crystal. Other schemes can be found on the Internet. To slightly simplify Crystal’s version, there are four *zones*, numbered I, II, III and IV, between a determiner (if there is one) and a noun. Zone I is for “absolute or intensifying” adjectives; II for those “not in I, III or IV” – and therefore the great majority; III for “participles or colour adjectives”; and IV for nationality adjectives, nouns used as adjectives, and adjectives whose meanings involve or relate to nouns. His example is “the same big red garden* chairs”.

It is unlikely that anyone can *consciously* apply any of these rules while speaking, although they might occasionally help in writing. In any event we are left with a seemingly insurmountable difficulty in that they

*It may be observed that “garden”, a “noun used as an adjective” can also be seen as a noun used “attributively”, as discussed in the preceding chapter. Or seen simply as an adjective!

all necessarily assign the huge number of English adjectives, according to their meaning, to a very small number of zones, and do nothing to sort out words allocated to the same zone. In particular, in the *CGEL* or Crystal version, how do we order those within zone II? There are hints of “zones within zones”, but apart from their not providing hard and fast rules, they could only be a small part of a total solution. For example, putting *evaluative* words before others such as *size* might decide between “good little girl” and “little good girl”*. The first seems the more natural. But “big bad wolf” versus “bad big wolf” is the exact opposite!

The order in such phrases often seems to come from the realm of *idioms*, *fixed expressions*, or *collocations* – groups of words that always (or usually) go together in the same order, and that can be thought of as “lexical items”, fixed in people’s memories just like words, even if the dictionaries don’t list them. In fact most of them are difficult or impossible to find in the reference books. They come easily to the native speaker, but not so easily to the non-native learner. To take another commonly quoted one, “a fine old house”, it is not very likely that an adult non-native speaker will have heard or read enough to have absorbed the idea that “an old fine house” just isn’t right.

The most general answer, however is that none of this matters very much, and that in most cases you

*Walter Scott once wrote “little two dogs” and had it corrected by Mrs Scott of Harden to “two little dogs”. The story is told in Lockhart’s biography.

are free to do whatever seems to fit the occasion. You can say “a blue eyed, fair haired man” or “a fair haired, blue eyed man” as you wish.

Word order can also have other kinds of significance. The placing of the word “only” is a well known example. You might have “Only the dog [and not the cat] bit the man”, “The dog only bit [and did not seriously injure?] the man”, or “The dog bit only the man [and not the woman who was with him]”. But the great Fowler himself warned against pedantic editing where the meaning is clear: “The man only died yesterday” does not really have to be corrected to “the man died only yesterday”.

A recent BBC announcement says: “Nicola Benedetti will perform *for the first time at the Edinburgh Festival*”. Knowledgeable listeners will have guessed correctly that she will perform *at the Edinburgh Festival for the first time*, but a more alert script editor would have left the rest of us in no doubt.

Then again, word-order choices, for example the placing of expressions like “today” or “next year”, may give different emphases, in this case giving either more or less prominence to the time element. Compare “We will study grammar today” with “Today, we will study grammar”.

Although native speakers just pick up the word-order rules, as they affect meaning, by the age of about seven or eight, and apply them without conscious effort, close

attention is still required in some instances (such as that of “only”).

More generally, the choice of word order may give a different *rythm* to a statement, making it either more, or less, “natural” or “readable”. To illustrate this point, we have taken an example from an unlikely source, Burchfield’s *OPUS* book, *The English Language*:

“In passing it is worthy of note that the temptation to treat all words of French origin as if once adopted they had the same history should be resisted.”

This is strikingly clumsy simply because the rest of Burchfield’s book is so eminently readable. The first eight words could be dispensed with anyway, but the most obvious trouble is the way in which the verb of the second clause is separated from its subject and trails limply along at the end, and this is essentially a word order problem. We venture on a replacement sentence:

“There is a temptation, which should be resisted, to treat all words of French origin as if they had had the same history since they were adopted”.

Ultimately, it is often the precise choice of word order that makes the difference between good, middling, or bad writing. When you read a novel by one of our great authors, have a closer look at some of the sentences as you go along, and ask yourself what other word orders would have been possible, but have been (consciously or unconsciously) rejected.

Crazy spelling

IF ENGLISH were known to the world for nothing else, its extraordinary spelling would be famous. Other languages, such as German or Italian, are written according to rules that make it easy to pronounce each word from what you see on the paper, or conversely, to write down what you hear, even without previous knowledge of the words in question*. The same is true of any language, like Indonesian or Swahili, that has been first recorded in our usual “Roman” alphabet in recent times.

There *are* rules in English, but they are often broken. For example, they give us “rite”, but we also have “right”, “write” and “wright”. Note, however, that in their *written* forms we have four different words here with different meanings. We have at least gained something, as compared with a phonetically spelt language.

Where do these strange spellings come from? In this case we may be aware that in Scottish dialects – which often retain older forms of English – “right” is pronounced “richt”. Clearly the English pronunciations

*French is much less chaotic than English, but does quite commonly flout its own phonetic spelling rules.

have changed, and have at some point left the old spellings behind, still in use in writing. As for “write”, it comes from Old English *writan*, and we are told that the *w* was pronounced, but this could never have been easy, so it is not surprising that it was dropped in speech. Similarly, the *w* in “wright” comes from *wrytha* or *wyrtha*. The dictionaries do not tell us how it lost the *th* or acquired a *gh*, but it is probably relevant that Old Frisian had *wrychta*.

There have been many proposals to reform the spelling, but the only ones that have succeeded have been a few not very important changes introduced into American English by Noah Webster, such as substituting “o” for “ou” in words like “labour”, “e” for “oe” in those like “oecology” (now internationally “ecology”), and “er” for “re” in “centre”, “theatre”, etc.*

The example of German, a similar language, suggests that a more thorough reform is possible, but every attempt has run into arguments about exactly whose pronunciation is to be followed and, for example, how closely the spelling should reflect the extraordinary range of vowel sounds of southern British English. And as already noted, the present spelling does quite often have the advantage of separating words of different meaning, when they are written down. We rather like having our “to”, “too” and “two”, and other such sets.

*The international standard unit of length is correctly the *metre*, but Americans, Germans, and others, commonly break the rules and write *meter*.

While English spelling presents a real problem both to native and non-native speakers, it is evidently not an insurmountable one. Many people are able to spell most of the words that do not conform to the phonetic rules, and some say that at least they can remember which are the words whose spelling they can't remember! A growing number of writers are now dependent on computers, whose "spelling checkers" and easily accessible dictionaries can help. Complete automation is difficult because, without extremely complicated programming, a computer cannot recognize a mistake, if what it produces is also a word in the dictionary, as for example when "discrete" is written instead of "discreet". The program will not spot typos such as missing the initial "t" in "there". Nor will it pick up an "it's" that should have been "its", or vice versa.

The ideal can only be to learn to spell, without constant recourse to dictionaries, etc. If you are searching for something on the Internet, it helps to spell it correctly, although the system will usually assist, if your error is a common or minor one. In any event, however, those who write for a living will not be highly regarded if they make too many spelling mistakes. In some work total freedom from error is demanded, as in printing the Bible, or in drawing up important legal or diplomatic documents. But in many cases, including newspapers, readers are becoming more tolerant, if only because they have no option, and in these fallen times it no longer even seems worth complaining.

Structure

WHEN YOU WANT to analyse the structure of the language, using our essentially traditional approach to grammar, one possible hierarchy of constituent parts is *morphemes, words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, chapters*, and finally *books* (which may be in *volumes*, or *parts*).

We have nothing useful to say about morphemes, which are the parts of a word that can be considered separately in grammar (like “consider” and “-ed”, or “separate” and “-ly”). But note at least that “morpheme” is not a synonym for “syllable”. The *CGEL* defines it as “the minimum unit of form and meaning”.

We won’t have anything to say about paragraphs, chapters, or books either, so the structural questions that we will try to deal with are those concerning *words* in *phrases**, *clauses*, and *sentences*.

In writing, checking, revising or editing text, the first rule is to give your attention to one *sentence* at a time, and as far as grammar is concerned it is clearly the most important item in the hierarchy. What a sentence

*Very far from completely. See Introduction.

does, however, is to put together *words*, each in its proper form, and in a certain order. In our presentation of the language, therefore, we have concentrated first on the word. Nearly all of what we have written up to this point has been about words, but we still have quite a lot more to say about them, as structural units.

What is often not made clear is that, with regard to each element in the hierarchy, a writer has a wide range of choices, to suit particular purposes. There are few self-evident or invariably correct answers. Even at the top level, you can *choose* to write a long complicated book, like the *CGEL*, or a short simple one, like this – and it would be easy enough to make the *CGEL* even longer*, or this one shorter.

In our Preface, we pointed out that some authors, notably Walter Scott – and we could have added Nancy Mitford – have done very well with little theoretical knowledge. We think, however, that most people would benefit from some. And there may be others who would just like to know more, from simple intellectual curiosity. The real puzzles are concerned with syntax – how it all goes together – which is what we are now coming to.

To begin, then, with *words*, we see it as a fundamental requirement that writers should take care to select the *mot juste*, and then to make sure they know

*We commented in an earlier footnote (p.4) that it is not really “comprehensive” !

its accepted meaning and usage, how to spell it and even to pronounce it correctly and, where this applies, to know how it is inflected to perform its various functions. Grammar then requires an understanding of how each word is related to other words.

What exactly is a word anyway? If you try to check with the dictionary, your first surprise may be to find that each letter of the alphabet is itself at least one word. That makes 26 to start with, and then you have & (the *ampersand*, read as “and”). The other items on your keyboard are usually something like ! @ # £ \$ % § # ^ * () - _ = + [] { } ; : , . < > / ? and can be dismissed as mere *symbols*, not usually used as words, although perhaps you *could* argue that they can be read as “exclamation”, “at”, “hash”, “pound(s)”, etc. Then you can go on to add the Greek and other alphabets and, as every Scrabble player knows, you can write letters out as “aitch”, “zed” (or “zee”), etc. – as well as alpha to omega, and many others.

The entry for “A¹ (also a)” in *Oxford* begins: “noun, the first letter of the alphabet”, then gives its plural as “As or A’s”. Note particularly that it is a *noun*, and therefore a word. Examples are given of its usage, such as: “suppose A had killed B”. The letters “a” and “I” are also ordinary English words, while “O” is in some of the printed Oxford dictionaries, although it is marked “obsolete”, as the English equivalent of the vocative in Latin (“O Caesar”). Other single letters turn up with special uses, as in the names of computer

languages like “C”, “U” for “upper class”, or “Y” for YMCA.

All the ordinary letters are both nouns and adjectives, while “a” is also an article and “I” is also a pronoun. Their adjectival uses in all cases, at least potentially, include phrases like “the C word” (which-ever might be intended!) or “V shaped”. They perform in sentences just like other words in their classes.

If you turn to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (the big one) you will find that the entry for each letter of the alphabet gives a list of the single-letter words that it makes. Even if you limit it to “real” words, unaccompanied by a hyphen or other punctuation mark, most letters give a good many words*.

There is no theoretical upper limit to the length of a word, and we have all heard about “antidisestablishmentarianism” and the like, but few words in common use exceed four syllables. The preceding paragraph has “unaccompanied” with five, but you won’t find very many more in this book. Note, however, that only a very dedicated advocate of “short words” would object to “unaccompanied” – like most such notions, that prejudice has limited usefulness.

You could also say that *numbers* appear in print, our usual characters from 0 to 9 providing ten more “one-

*You could also amuse yourself by investigating two-letter words. There must be something like 200 pronounceable possibilities, of which a large proportion are in use, many to give more than one word.

letter words” for a start. And any number at all can be written out in ordinary letters. Then there would be the question of Roman numbers. Can “X” be a word meaning “ten”?

Traditionally, general dictionaries omitted one huge class of words that we mentioned in a previous chapter, the *proper nouns*, along with any adjectives formed from them. The current vogue is to include some, but obviously there isn’t room to list more than a small selection of those that are to be found in specialized sources. In our opinion that makes a good case for omitting all or most of them. Or one might question the criteria used, for example, in leaving out great rivers such as the *Rufiji* in Tanzania or the *Mahakam* in Borneo, while including relatively small or unimportant ones such as the *Lot*, the *Spey* or the *Trent*. Or you might ask, among a great many other such questions, why an Oxford dictionary lists *James Thomson* as the possible author of *Rule Britannia*, rather than as the known author of *The Seasons* – the most popular poem of the eighteenth century, and a landmark in English literature.

Similar considerations apply to other groups of words, such as trade names, or many of the technical terms of any art, science or technology. Nevertheless, these all have to be dealt with in speech or writing, every bit as much as those that get into the general dictionaries, and we need to know about them. For example, if a company name is given a final *s*, and used

as the subject of a verb, should it be treated as singular or plural? Should journalists apply the biologists' naming conventions, using Latin words capitalized and italicized by rules, or should they give only anglicized forms (*Dahlia* or dahlia?). Botany and human anatomy are notorious for their specialized vocabularies, to which almost anyone may want access at some time.

Possibly the time has come when all this is no longer a problem. Even an almost inconceivably long combined (but appropriately annotated) list could now be compiled, that would be searchable in seconds.

Words as such have been the subject of many controversies about what is or is not good or acceptable English. We will have a few opinionated comments to make, ourselves, in our chapter on Problems.

Between the word and the sentence comes the *phrase*. As now generally conceived, a phrase may be just a single word – it is its *function* that decides. Or it may be a little group of words from different word classes, forming a unit that has relations to other phrases, and which may sometimes move around, as an entity, within the sentence.

Phrases are named by their headword: *noun*, *verb*, *adjectival*, *adverbial*, or *prepositional*. In this categorization, a pronoun can take the place of a noun as the headword in a “noun phrase”.

The defining characteristic of a phrase is then that it acts in the way these words indicate. A noun phrase

can be the subject or the object of a verb phrase, or it can be modified by an adjectival phrase. An adverbial phrase can modify a verb phrase or an adjectival phrase or another adverbial phrase. A prepositional phrase does the same things as a preposition, either with words or with other phrases.

It is at this point that grammar becomes a difficult subject! As we suggested in our Preface, modern grammarians, working on traditional lines (but greatly extending the scope of their inquiries) have given a preponderant place to the *phrase* in their explanations. A very large part of the *CGEL* is concerned with a minute dissection of what phrases are, and just how they work. There is no way in which this mass of material can be summarized, and we have to say that if you really want to know about it you must go to the *CGEL* itself – and that is no light undertaking!

The first difficulty is an unexpected one, simply identifying the phrases in a sentence. For example, in a simple sentence like “The children go to a local school” you have to understand that “The children” is a noun phrase, “go” is a one-word verb phrase, and “to a local school” is an adverbial phrase which is made up of a prepositional one, “to” and a noun one, “a local school” – some of which you may not see as self-evident. And it gets far worse than that! We think there is some justification in our claim that what we have put into this little book is worth knowing about, in spite of having this apparently enormous gap in it. If you want

to be a real grammarian you have to know all about the analysis of phrases, but if you just want a more general knowledge of English grammar, you can go a long way without following all the intricacies of these studies. We have, of course, picked out some of their conclusions where it is not essential to embed them in the analysis of phrases as such.

With these few remarks to fill in the gap left by omitting a full treatment of phrases, we move on to *clauses* and *sentences*. They can be dealt with together, because a *simple sentence* is in fact just one single clause. All we propose to do here is to set out the rest of the relevant definitions, which are often a source of confusion – you can easily see why! One version, which seems to make sense, can be stated as follows:

The minimum requirement for a clause is that it must have a *subject* and a *verb*. A *main clause* is one that is complete in itself and could be a *sentence*. A *compound sentence* is one that consists of two or more main clauses, joined by *coordinating conjunctions*, commonly *and*, *but*, *or*, *with* or *yet*. A *subordinate clause* is one which is associated with a larger clause and could not be a sentence by itself. A *complex sentence* is one that contains at least one subordinate clause. A *compound-complex sentence* therefore contains two or more main clauses and at least one subordinate clause. Subordinate clauses can be (a) *adverbial*, introduced by a *subordinating conjunction*, such as *although*, *if*, or *when*; (b) *relative*, introduced

by a *relative pronoun* – *which, who, whom, whose, or that* – or the pronoun may be omitted; (c) *complement*, often introduced by *that*, which may be omitted; (d) *indirect question*, introduced by *what, where, wherever, whether, which, who, why, how, or if*.

Examples (with clauses in brackets) are:

Simple: [I am going home today].

Compound: [I am going home today] [and I am coming back tomorrow].

Complex: [I am going home today] [if I can leave in time*].

Compound-complex with:

(a) *adverbial clause*: [I am going today] [and I will return tomorrow] [*if I can manage to do so*].

(b) *relative clause*: [My father, [*who has been visiting*] is leaving today], [but will soon be back].

(c) *complement*: [The story [*that I have big debts***] is quite untrue].

(d) *indirect question*: [It was quite suddenly [and when I was thinking of other things], [that she asked [*what I was doing at the weekend*]].

*This could be called either an *adverbial* or a *conditional* clause.

**This clause could replace “the story” as the subject of “is”.

Problems

IF WE WERE given to using the kind of headings for which the old original *Fowler* was notorious – such as *Elegant variation*, which we’ll be coming to – we might have headed this chapter *Bees in our bonnets*. It covers many disparate questions, but they tend to have one thing in common. On any disputed usage there are nearly always the same sort of opposed views to be found. On the one hand it will be said, in effect, that it should be banned, for breaking the rules which we think are at present in force (derived from actual usage as interpreted by competent judges). On the other hand it may be seen as “wrong”, but so widely used that we have to accept it, at least as an option.

First on our list is that rather strange, isolated inflection in our verbal system, the “s” that indicates the third person singular of the present tense in the indicative mood. As is often remarked, where the plural noun has an s, the plural verb doesn’t, while for the

singular noun and singular verb it is the other way round. Failure to make the right concord must be by far the commonest error in both spoken and written English. Listen to the BBC or read any newspaper, and you can find examples every day.

Although we never give up on trying to get things right, we have to admit that this particular error doesn't really matter very much. In many cases it will have escaped the notice of writer, editor, and the great majority of readers, and no misunderstandings will have resulted.

Statements like: "Only a fraction of German war criminals were ever punished" have a good chance of getting by unnoticed. In this case your carping critic is more likely to query the use of "fraction" (which could be anything up to 99.999... percent!) than to observe that it is a singular noun, and that the verb of which it is the subject should be "was".

But then, this leads to one of the less easily solved problems. What if the writer had said: "The majority of German war criminals were never punished"? In British English, some words like "majority" can be regarded as plural, if you think of them as referring to collections of individual people, as it would be in this example. For some reason, we don't think that "fraction" would pass that test – but who knows? Maybe it would. In American English the rule is simpler: if a word is singular in form it takes a singular verb. The American government always thinks, the

British one may think. This presents the writer of British English with a choice, which is often not an easy one, although it can be some consolation that few readers will either notice or care, whether they are told that “the committee think” or “the committee thinks”. The *CGEL* has a long discussion of words and phrases which either take the “wrong” form of the verb, or for which the writer should choose between singular and plural. Even some phrases that consist of two nouns joined by “and”, like “bread and butter”, can be treated as honorary singulars. The trouble is that there is no definitive list of phrases, or of words, for that matter, for which the options are open.

Burchfield points out the niggling distinction with *nouns of multitude* – such as “number” – which is based on whether there is an “a” or a “the”. A number of things *depend*, but *the* number of things *depends*. Note that this rule just might be decisive in making “fraction” take the singular verb “was” in the example given above.

However, an even greater source of trouble is probably not the choice between these options, but simply that verb and subject are sometimes separated by many other words. That is true of one cherished specimen that turned up a few years ago: “The prospects of a measure banning indecent material reaching President Bush’s desk before the November election is not assured”. Unfortunately, we never heard the end of that story. What is at work here is

“proximity”, and it is occasionally suggested that the rules should take this into account. However, there must be very few grammarians who would want to accept a proximity rule for this example. To write “The prospects ... is” is just plain careless. And the accepted application of the *proximity rule*, in fact, is only in expressions like “one or two people *were*” where the plural “two” is nearer the verb than the singular “one”.

In any event, many other examples keep appearing that are simply wrong. The “comments” that newspapers print without editing are a superabundant source, and we have just this minute found, for example: “People in the Middle East don’t forget their history – even when the US and Europe does”.

Sometimes it really is difficult to decide what is right, and there may be no “authority” to turn to. A BBC headline reads “Philippines battles food damage”. Should it have been “battle”? Try it on your friends.

Next on our list is the “I” or “me” confusion, referred to in our Introduction. While there are few letters to the editor about number concord in the third person, there are far more about the erroneous misuses of “I” for “me”. There are two main sorts, both of them rather peculiar in their different ways. One is typified by the choice between “It’s me” and “It’s I”, and the other by “for my friend and me” versus “for my friend and I”. Then there is a third kind, typically involving the choice between “than me” and “than I” or “like me” and “like I”.

We have convinced ourselves, at least, that “It’s me” is correct, natural, ordinary English, and that the argument against it is based on the “great delusion” that English grammar should take its rules from the Latin. Latin requires its nominative case here, and that translates into the English subjective “I”, but it seems obvious enough that “natural” English takes the objective “me”. Oddly, the argument is generally confined to the first person singular. People who insist on “it’s I” will often, or even usually, say “it’s her (or him)” rather than “it’s she (or he)”, while “it’s we” is hardly ever heard at all, at least as a complete sentence in itself. To hear someone begin a telephone call with “It’s I” usually indicates that it is a rather pedantic American who is speaking. And we think the pedantry is misguided.

In spite of Pinker’s arguments (see Introduction) we are equally or even more convinced that “for my friend and I” is wrong. In fact we think it is simply a *hypercorrection*, originating in some vague idea that “I” always sounds better than “me”. In reality, however, there is in this case an extra problem. We have agreed that our rules are to be based on actual use, and this error is made not only by the uneducated masses, but also by the highest in the land, notoriously including President Obama, one of the most literate presidents of modern times. We have also noted many instances from an Oxford professor, in other respects a careful user of the language. However all that may be, we must hold to our principle that the corpora

decide and, as far as we know, “me” has the majority support here. And if you said to any of the perpetrators: “You wouldn’t say ‘he brought it for I’, would you?” they would get the point, perhaps promise to reform their ways, and very likely continue saying “for my friend and I” much as they did before.

On the other hand if you did decide that this can’t be an error, because of its widespread actual use, you would have to insert a rather curious long winded rule in the grammar books, to make it at least an acceptable option. It would have to be something like: “Pronouns governed by prepositions are in the objective case if they are the only word so governed, but if they follow another pronoun or a noun they may, optionally, be in the subjective case. For example, ‘for *me*’, ‘for him and *I*’, ‘for Mr Smith and *I*’”. It looks like a non-starter! The only practical answer seems to be to sweep the whole affair under the carpet and pretend we didn’t read or hear the solecism.

As to our third case, “She is older than I” can be explained either by saying that a final “am” is understood, or else as another hypercorrection. We favour the latter explanation and would in any case say “than me”. The *CGEL* has an interesting piece about all this, and says that “I” may sometimes be an *option* after “like”, as in “She’s a teacher, just *like you and me/I*”.

It goes on to make the interesting suggestion that “me” and other uses of the objective case of personal pronouns may be the *default* choice in natural English,

wherever there is no good reason for preferring “I” or other subjectives. This default rule would also be enough to explain why we have “me” in those common little verbless utterances like “Me too!” and “Who – me?”.

The present status of the word “whom”, the objective case of “who”, is rather strange. It is tending to drop out of the language, and some people hardly ever use it, always putting the nominative “who” where the objective “whom” would formerly have been obligatory. It is of course familiar enough in quotations like “For whom the bell tolls”, and in fact it survives in some more or less formal usage, but very few people would say: “Whom were you with last night?” It sometimes turns up as a hypercorrection, as in: “Mr Scott knows whom his shoppers are”, which is amusing as having been perpetrated in an article written by the author of the *Economist’s* own usage guide, no less*. See also the recent *New York Times* case mentioned in our Introduction. When in doubt, you can nearly always put “who”, and nobody will say you are wrong – so it is really hardly a problem at all.

Now we can turn to what we think is a more serious matter. Everybody knows that as time passes, words change their meanings. An extreme case is that of *girl*. Although its etymology is the subject of much scholarly

*In case an explanation is required, the point here is that the word we need is not the object of “knows”, but the subject of “are”, and so “who”, not “whom”.

study, it is generally agreed that it once included both sexes. More typically, it is not so very long ago that *egregious*, from a root that meant “outstanding”, usually implied outstandingly good. It then changed to the opposite, to mean outstandingly bad. Now *egregious* is dropping its root meaning altogether, and is coming to signify little more than just plain bad. Sometimes readers (or listeners) – generally the older ones – protest about such changes, and say, you can’t do this sort of thing to our language, you are destroying it! But they generally do so in vain.

We could go on for ever on the use and misuse of particular words. Perhaps the best way to dispose of some outstanding cases will be to make a little list, with short comments. Not everybody will agree with it:

- **commence(ment)** – *Begin(ning)* is better, except where it is the accepted term for some institutional event.
- **convince** – This has almost completely replaced *persuade*, while also retaining its older use – a rather weird deprivation of the lexicon.
- **ecological** – It would be better not to use this word where something like “*environmentally friendly*” would be more appropriate, for example when referring to temperature control in buildings, when it has nothing to do with plants or animals.
- **exponential(ly)** – As in *exponential increase*, usually meaning only a *rapid* one, although it just might contain some notion of a mathematical series using a positive exponent greater than one. Best avoided.

- **fortuitous** – Although it is nearly a lost cause, good writers still do not use it pointlessly as a substitute for *fortunate*. Its real meaning is “by chance”, and it should at least retain a vestige of this.
- **fulsome** – As with fortuitous, good writers still use it properly, i.e., with “praise”, etc., to mean “*insincere*”, not “great”.
- **gas** – The general American use of this word for “*gasolene*” (or as British English has it, “*petrol*”) seems foolish, and occasionally causes real confusion. It also leads to oddities, like “the price of gas and natural gas”, and mysteries, like “oil and gas”, where it could be either.
- **literally** – See the end of our Introduction, about Nancy Mitford’s having been “literally lionised”, which ought to have meant that she had *really* been turned into a lioness. The remark would have been unexceptionable without the word “literally”.
- **multiple** – An unwanted vogue word whenever it pointlessly replaces *many*.
- **overly** – Use *over*, certainly in British English.
- **prior to** – *Before* is nearly always better.
- **quantum** – As in *quantum leap*. Best left to the physicists; its metaphorical journalistic use is nearly always wrong.
- **systemic** – A technical term in linguistics, animal and plant physiology, and disease control, which can reasonably be extended to anything which pervades any kind of system. However, the word for doing something in a thorough, orderly way, is *systematic*.
- **whilst** – An unnecessary variant of *while*. It is not used in American English, and British English would be none the worse without it.

We have not put **kid** into our list, in its sense of human offspring, because this cause has now been completely lost, to the point that “child” has all but disappeared from the vocabulary. You might have thought that parents would have hesitated before referring to their young as goats, or that the children themselves might have objected. This little piece of “low slang”, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* says was first recorded in 1599, became a widely popular colloquialism in the nineteenth century. Until the mid-twentieth it was not acceptable in any serious work on education, but now, incredibly, it appears in standard English. And we even have grandkids!

The case of **unique** is too hard to accept, even if its downfall seems to be a *fait accompli*. Maybe it should be made a unique exception! A word that obviously means “the only one of its kind” is surely worth preserving or reinstating, and it seems utterly pointless to use it to replace another perfectly adequate one, *unusual*. We would like to think that no self-respecting writer, even now, would use it for anything but its correct purpose, or that any editor worth his salt would accept expressions like “rather unique”. In an earlier chapter we were about to use it as an example of a whole sub-class, the non-gradable modifiers, when we decided to put it here instead, as a problem case. It should be noted that many of the other words of this type are still in good working order. Nobody says, for example, that one person, idea, or thing is more

principal than another. And only olive oil can be extra *virgin*.

A word that used to be much watched and argued over is **between**. In its definitions *Oxford* is quite clear that it is a preposition connecting two things, as is obvious from its etymology. In a few cases, however, *Oxford* says “two or more”, and in fact very often it is used for three or more items, as when we ourselves referred to the options *between* “lower case”, “lower-case”, and “lowercase” (where an old-fashioned purist would have put *among*). It is sometimes said that “between *a*, *b*, and *c*” means “between *a* and *b*, *b* and *c*, and *c* and *a*”. Such sophistry is not really needed; it is all just a normal development in actual usage.

Similarly, **either** and **neither** are supposed to involve only two items, but *Oxford* says they are occasionally applied to more, and we have just recently found a headline in the *New York Times* that reads “Neither Phones, Nor Cameras, Nor Tweets in the Court”.

Both is less commonly extended to more than two items. We have found “bread, both of flour, oatmeal and barleymeal” in Scott’s *Waverley*, but we shouldn’t use specimens as old as this.

For another case that makes a distinction between two and more items, see our remarks on the gradability of modifiers in our chapter on *Other word classes*. The simple rule is to use the *comparative* forms, like

better, for two things and the *superlative*, like **best**, for three or more.

The more rigorous editors still object (rightly in our opinion) to the very common and widely accepted misuse of **due to**, as in “The ... authority closed ... schools due to the snow” (BBC). Ask yourself, what was due to the snow? They should have said “because of”.

There are attempts to excuse **double negatives**, like “I’m not going back no more”, as being widely used historically, and in dialects for emphasis, or on the grounds that we must not expect language to work like arithmetic (where two minuses make a plus). We think, nevertheless, that it has to be agreed that they are not acceptable in standard English.

There are many other expressions that we hesitate to denounce, because they are often used by good writers, although they seem odd to us. One would be the use of *only* to replace “few” or perhaps “very few” as in “Frederick O’Connor was one of the only Tibetan speakers in the British army” (P.French, *Younghusband*). *Only* may or may not be wrong, but *few* seems much more natural. Another would be the insertion of an extra preposition after *including*. This specimen comes from the *BBC*: “... lower stones [on which an upper one is placed, marked with a cross] had been found elsewhere in Scotland including in Canna”. Here we would prefer “including *some*”, but in other cases “including” is enough by itself, as in this

one from the *Guardian*: “... across Europe, including in Britain” – where the “in” is quite unnecessary.

The insertion of unnecessary words is in fact a more general question. We have mentioned the meaningless prepositions in phrases like “meet *up*” or “meet *up with*”. Superfluous words are most charitably seen as more or less innocuous or even welcome “fillers”, “padding” or “roughage”. Close attention to our own text, *in fact*, will reveal many examples! They often seem to improve that elusive property, readability. Occasionally we feel less charitable (to other writers) and wonder, for example, if some phrases like “period *of time*” or “red *in colour*” would be better without the words in italics. Less obviously, to write “thirty-seven *different* species” implies that some species are *not* different from each other – but then, they wouldn’t be separate species, would they?

There is often a good practical reason for using redundant words. They can make it more likely that your meaning will be correctly understood. If you arrange a meeting for Tuesday the thirty-first of May, the “Tuesday” is unnecessary, but to put it in may increase the chance of people remembering, and getting it right. You may want to send a message whose essential point is contained in just one word, like “Come!”, but you are more likely to get results if you begin with “Please” and, if the case merits it, add “as soon as possible” or some such phrase, or give a reason for your request.

Almost everything that is said or written can be shortened, but seldom without at least *some* loss. Extreme brevity gives you “telegraphese” as it was called in the days of telegrams. Nobody would read a book written in that form of the language.

We have also made a previous reference to what might be called *pronoun phobia* (see the chapter on Pronouns). When you are looking for specimens of sub-optimal English, you seldom have to take much trouble. This time, one came easily to hand from current reading – an excellent short biography by R.W.B. Lewis, published in 2001. Two consecutive sentences read: “Dante moved ahead at an impressive pace. Existing records show that Dante addressed the special council ...”. It is as good a specimen of simple “pronoun phobia” as you could hope to find. There can be no reason for not replacing the second “Dante” by “he”. The author (or his editor) should have done so.

Pronoun phobia gets us into the realm of language aesthetics. A rather bigger problem of the same kind is the repetitive use of words, when it cannot be avoided so easily as by the use of a pronoun. It is generally regarded as “poor style” to repeat the same, or even a closely similar word, in any short passage, such as a paragraph. We ourselves have gone to some trouble to avoid doing so in this book. When we were writing about *Articles*, for example, a “great difficulty” in one line became “a major hurdle” in the next. But we have not laid any general or absolute prohibition

on repetition, and in several of our paragraphs the word “grammar” can be found twice or even thrice within a few lines, where it does not seem particularly obtrusive. You can find one questionable specimen near the end of our chapter on *Verbs*, which reads: “*Here are some specimens. Note, of course, that while they are verbal nouns here, ...*”. For some reason the repetition of “here” catches the eye, but we let it pass.

One problem about replacing a word by one or more synonyms is that the cure may be worse than the disease. If you write “treaty” in one sentence, “pact” in the next, and “agreement” in the one after that, the reader may think, momentarily at least, that you are referring to three different things.

Burchfield refers to the “celebrated” article in the original *Fowler*, under the heading *Elegant variation*, which goes into the question at great length. It is certainly not easy to know where to draw the line. For example, we have recently come across “except in exceptional cases” – *we* don’t like it, but who is to say?

Over the last two and a half centuries, *feminism* has been an increasingly common topic of social discussion. Until fairly recent times even the most ardent reformers accepted that “he” could be used by linguistic convention to include “she”. But now many women, backed by their male sympathizers, question this and other English usages that appear to discriminate against them. We have mentioned that the usual terms for the species were *man* and *mankind*, just as

dog is generally understood to include *bitch*. Similarly we are fairly sure that when Burns hoped that men would some day be brothers he didn't mean to exclude women as sisters. No doubt a good case can be made for preferring terms such as *humans* and *humankind*. We suppose, however, that the idea of *history* discriminatively excluding *herstory* was meant as a joke, along with many others on similar lines.

Be all that as it may, it generally seems reasonable to accommodate the feminist point of view, for example, by putting "he or she", where that is applicable, instead of just "he". When this becomes too repetitive and clumsy the best solution, we think, is most often to reconstitute the relevant statement in the plural, and use "they", wherever that can be done. Another solution is to use "they" as a singular. The result, however, can seem rather strange, as in this example from an article in the *Guardian*: "... marvel as the bartender has to put their biceps into the job" .

While we try to deal fairly with the feminist arguments, we can recall another topic that was almost equally hot in its day, the mid-twentieth century, but is now scarcely heard of. According to *Burchfield*, the notion of *etymological correctness* was thought to be essentially sound, even by the great linguistic scholars of the day. His hero Fowler had to find excuses for words like *bemuse* and *readable*, that mingle Anglo-Saxon and French roots. Burchfield himself noted that it was only relatively recent coinages, such as *bureau-*

cracy, that were being seriously objected to. It was probably the great outburst of words containing the Greek *tele-* in combination with Latin or other elements, as in *television*, that got the usual critics excited. For historical interest, see *Burchfield*, under *hybrid formations* and *tele-*. In ordinary writing practice, you can forget about it!

There are more persistent, and to some extent better founded objections to large classes of other foreign words and expressions. As well as joining bits of French and English words together, we have imported huge numbers of whole words not only from French, but also from Latin, Greek, Italian, and a great many other languages from every part of the world. Typically, new imports are at first denounced, then they are either dropped or accepted, and finally some are assimilated into English, often with marked changes in pronunciation. The practical writers' problem is to decide if it is advantageous to use words that some or many readers will object to, or on the other hand if there is a good reason for employing them.

Latin or Greek phrases are no longer easy for educated readers to cope with. Taking "vice versa" to be completely assimilated, with its anglicized pronunciation, we have in this book used only one truly Latin phrase, *ipso facto*, justifying it, on the one hand as being fairly well known, and on the other hand as a neat and precise way of saying "for that very reason".

But even this is a borderline case, and some readers will think we could have done without it.

Similarly, we have one French expression, *mot juste*, where many would say that “right word” would have been good enough. This one in fact is on its way to being assimilated into English, and is included in many dictionaries, although still usually printed in italics. Our reason for using it is that it has a subtly different penumbra of meaning, and in addition it may emphasize the great importance we attach to the idea. We have also used *fait accompli* which, although it still appears in italics, has become the usual expression for what we mean.

Then at any one time there are many expressions that are widely condemned as *clichés**, *hackneyed expressions**, or other pejorative terms. Many are quotations from the Bible or Shakespeare, while others spring up from no obvious source. A long lasting one in recent times, still often used, is “at this point of time”, which seldom means anything more than just *now*.

We would only make one general point about all these usages, which is that you must be cautious in condemning them. They can be irritating and worse than useless, but occasionally they may enliven your text and make it convey more than “plain English” ever could. And what would football commentators do if they were banned from using clichés?

*In an odd reversal of the usual taxonomic hierarchy, *Burchfield* calls these two categories “genera of the same species” .

Finally, we feel obliged to say something about *punctuation* – which is often seen as one big problem! One thing that makes us reluctant is the memory of a very long article in a scholarly journal, entirely devoted to the *semicolon*. Surely the writer of it, and its publishers, had lost all sense of proportion? Can it matter all that much if, in a particular instance, one writer puts a semicolon where another might prefer a colon, a comma, a dash, or a full stop? Then we have just seen an article about the *comma splice*, and have had to try to remember what we must have been told about that solecism, in the dim past. It can't be much of an "error", we think, if it can be exemplified by "I came, I saw, I conquered". It would be a pettifogging editor indeed who would remove these commas – which must have been inserted by some ancient translator – or replace them by anything else.

There are many sources of advice on punctuation. On the few occasions when we feel the urge to get it exactly right we consult the *Chicago Manual of Style*. On one point that really does seem to bother people, this authority has a lot to say on how quotation marks fit in with other punctuation. There is a slightly different American system, but even in America the British one is recommended for some purposes: "[question marks and exclamation points] belong to the quoted material they are placed within the closing quotation mark; if they belong to the including sentence as a whole, they are placed after the quotation mark". In discussing the traditional American practice the

Manual itself refers to this sort of detail as “the exquisitely technical question of the position of the period”, which suggests just what we feel about it.

In this book, in giving first place to double rather than single quotation marks, we have followed what the Chicago manual says is American practice, but adopted also by some British users. This seems sensible, because it tends to reduce confusion with other uses of the single inverted comma. In any case the choice is largely just a matter of fashion. It is not so long ago that the allegedly American preference was usual on both sides of the Atlantic.

Learning and teaching

LEARNING A LANGUAGE is a mysterious art. For some it is an excruciating struggle; others appear to become fluent without exerting any effort whatsoever. The ability of most people, however, lies between these extremes. For average learners to acquire a practical knowledge of a foreign language, they need to be taught at least *some* analyses of the rules, and to undertake *some* conscious memorization of the vocabulary, even although what they need most of all is to be given plenty of practice, and exposure to reliable sources that they can imitate without thinking too much about it.

Then, in looking more closely at their achievements, we are not sure about how to assess them. How, for example, can we *measure* fluency? Can the ability to converse easily, albeit with frequent and obvious syntactical errors, mean that the speaker is a natural

“linguist”? Then, many reach a level of spoken fluency in which they make relatively few errors, only to have their apparent prowess put in question by the briefest examination of their written skills. There are also rather rare cases of students who are better at understanding and applying rules when it comes to writing, than they are at holding simple conversations.

People tend to simplify such concepts of linguistic ability, and in extreme cases to marvel at someone’s capacity to run off a few phrases in a foreign tongue. This reaction is particularly wrong-headed because, on the one hand, it is a simple task to memorize a few lines of almost anything, and on the other hand, those who are marvelling are usually not well qualified to judge the worth of the performance. A talent for mimicry is a priceless starting point in language learning, but in itself it is not enough.

I* come to the discussion of this subject from two starting points. As a child I was an extremely lazy student, yet still managed to excite my language teachers by my superficial ability to mimic phrases of French and German without effort. Of these languages I retain the ability to impress only those who are easily impressed, as described above.

Then, later in life, I was dropped into my mother’s native pond of Java, and found myself in a situation where my only means of social survival was to learn to

*The “I” of this chapter is MF, who wrote its first draft.

speaking Indonesian. For my purposes at this time, the “lazy” approach worked extremely well. And, let me make it clear, this means that any Indonesian grammar I allude to in what follows will have been acquired by osmosis, not study.

My other starting point is that for my entire adult life I have worked as a teacher of English to Indonesians, most of whom have already received some form of English instruction ever since they began to have formal education.

From the frequency of unidiomatic usages that I have observed among my students, over what is now a good many years, it has been easy to identify misguided teaching and outright errors in mainstream English education in Indonesia. A typical example would be “Keep silent!” instead of the standard English “Be quiet!”. There are also many common mispronunciations, such as “opposite” with the final syllable pronounced as in “site”.

There is also the most conspicuous feature of all in the imperfect English syntax of many Indonesians – and indeed of the speakers of many other languages – the omission of the verb “to be”. We English speakers grow so used to being told, for example, “Your visitor here now”, that we hardly notice the omission. After all, it makes no difference at all to comprehension, and when all is said and done, only tells us that the speaker does not share our great advantage of having grown up with the language. And that is presumably why it is

such a difficult error to eradicate. But an error it undoubtedly is.

I am sure that whoever is teaching them, the most serious problem facing Indonesian students of English is presented by the verbs. And those who find the verbs difficult to cope with should not have their efforts belittled. For all but a very few Indonesians, it really is not an easy matter.

For a start, Indonesian has no tenses (or the English equivalents of tenses, which we'll come back to) but relies upon "clarifiers" to give an idea of when action is taking place. Moreover, they are used only when such a clarification is deemed necessary. Unsurprisingly then, there is much room for confusion between the two languages. A simple example can be seen in the translation of *saya pergi*. There may be nothing in the wording of a text to show whether it refers to the past or the present, although if it is the future there is more chance of this being indicated. The translator's choice may be guided only by the general context – or it may have to depend on little more than guesswork! And then the best translation may not be the simple "I go" or "I went", but more likely one of the wide range of other expressions available, such as "I am going".

Any native English speaker, when asked: "What did you do at the weekend?", would reply using a phrase expressing past time, such as "I went swimming". However, of the many thousands of Indonesian students who have come under my tutelage over the

years, I think I could count on one hand the number who have been able to give an immediate and correct response to such a question in acceptable English. Most of them would say “I go swimming” (last weekend!). Which, as we all know, is wrong.

If you go back to our chapter on Verbs you will be reminded that English has a bewildering array of what we have called “quasi tenses”. They not only cover a great range of choices in ways for expressing time, but they can play strange tricks, as when someone tells you “He will be at home now”, meaning only that “he” usually is, at this time of day.

Perhaps this supply of “tenses” in English is only useful up to a point. From my examples, it seems clear that English has greater resources than Indonesian for precision in meaning. It is possible that educated native speakers of English miscommunicate ideas about time to one another less often than educated native speakers of Indonesian do. However, a struggling teacher might well ask if the benefit is commensurate with the complexity of the system that has to be taught and learned.

It is some relief to note that Indonesian is commonly slightly clearer about expressing future time, and therefore in translating the English future forms with “will” (or “shall”) than it is about distinguishing past from present. It usually throws in some word like “tomorrow”.

Having stressed the great difficulty of this aspect of English grammar (for those who do not learn it as small children) I must also state that I do not believe that real every-day English should be dismantled, rearranged, or scaled down, for the benefit of non-native speakers. The richness and functionality of languages cannot be engineered, and to the best of my knowledge all attempts to simplify English have been largely unsuccessful.

Verb problems are not restricted to expressions of time. One of the most infuriating and seemingly insoluble problems in English grammar is subject-verb concord. It is something of a linguistic curiosity that it comes down to the presence or absence of that one letter *s* that marks the third person singular of the present tense in the indicative mood. The practical problem is often exacerbated by the Byzantine variation that is outlined in our chapter on Nouns. Features of it that affect concord include the difference between countable and non-countable nouns, and the frequency of irregular plurals, as well as words like “police”, that have a singular form, but refer to more than one person. Then there are those, like “committee” or “majority”, that can be grammatically either singular or plural. And then again there is the idiom that refers to one person as “they”, introduced to placate feminist objectors to the old linguistic convention that “he” could include “she”.

All of the above may be compared with the simpler Indonesian system of pluralizing, which by and large is merely the reduplication of the noun. So *orang* (person) becomes *orang-orang* (people). However, it is by no means a rigorously applied solution, and especially in speech it is often unclear as to whether the unreduplicated word refers to one or more. It is sometimes said, in fact, that reduplication is not exactly equivalent to forming a plural. Very often, the same word serves as either singular or plural, and the reduplicated form really suggests a class. *Anak* can be either a child, or children seen as groups of individuals, while *anak-anak* refers to children as an age class. To an English speaker the result of reduplicating a multi-syllabled loan word can sound bizarre, as for example *constitution-constitution*, when comparing, say, those of the USA and Switzerland.

When you add that Indonesian has no subject-verb concord in number, there is clearly a wide open field for errors to be made. Whereas in English you need to know the difference between I, you, we or they “do”, and he, she or it “does”, the single Indonesian word *melakukan* would translate the verb in each of these examples, most of the time.

It is one thing to teach such such oddities as “one person, two people” (noting that “two persons” is also possible, while “one people” is something else again). Or it is easy enough even to set out the structures of the different expressions of time, which do not involve

difficult learning processes in themselves. But on the other hand, when you consider that statements like “Last weekend I go shopping” or “My mother help me with my homework” correspond more or less exactly with what the speaker is actually thinking, mistakes in applying an acquired knowledge of English structures are surely forgivable.

Pronunciation, and its relation to spelling, is another major source of trouble. We discussed “Crazy Spelling” under that chapter head, and there are the added complications of residual memories of Dutch orthography where, among other things, English *y* is represented by *j*, and English *j* had to be *dj* in names like Jakarta. A much deeper problem lies in the actual differences between languages, independent of how they use the Roman alphabet.

Anyone who has learned another European language knows part of the difficulty. For example, many English speakers find it very odd that the two French phrases *au-dessus* and *au-dessous* should have the opposite meanings of “above” and “below”, when to an “English” ear they sound so much alike (and many people find it difficult to pronounce the “closed” sound of *u* correctly). Most of the trouble within Europe is with the vowels, although the exact values of the *l* and *r* sounds, for example, may also be a problem.

Indonesian vowels cause comparatively little trouble in moving from one language to the other. English ones may be difficult, but differ so much between regional

variations of the language that listeners are tolerant in their expectations. English consonants, however, hardly match Indonesian ones at all. Certain groups, like b, f, p, and v, seem to fall in between those of the other language, and are very often confused with each other. A young girl whom we English speakers had known for years as “Lupi” eventually revealed to us that she spelt it “Luvi”. But it still sounds like “Loopy”, which she most certainly isn’t.

For Indonesian learners the main difficulty that arises from the phonetic conventions is, of course, in writing. Getting them to play Scrabble can also be quite a revelation, when words like “vig” frequently appear on the board. Spoken English, on the other hand, is a very forgiving language, and nobody will notice if their pronunciation is not quite right. Although in this example the intended word can be guessed as “fig”, that is partly because the spelling of the other possibilities, “big” or even “pig”, is more likely to be correctly known.

As to more general principles of teaching, we are often told that it is very much contrary to Indonesian culture to say anything to people that will make them look bad. This may be so, but we suspect that it is equally true of almost any society. All successful teachers know that while praise should be freely given, derogatory remarks should be avoided, and mistakes should be corrected as tactfully as possible. In language teaching, there is the additional need for discretion as

to which, and how many, errors should be picked up on any particular occasion. With beginners especially, you must ignore many unimportant mistakes or inadequacies at first, and tighten the screw slowly as learning progresses.